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**The ‘Angelic Quire’**  
**Rethinking Female Voices in Anglican Sacred**  
**Music, c. 1889**

**Elizabeth Blackmore**

Submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts

Department of History, Durham University

2015



# **The ‘Angelic Quire’: Rethinking Female Voices in Anglican Sacred Music, c. 1889**

**Elizabeth Blackmore**

Both academic scholarship and popular wisdom often assume women’s absence from Anglican musical history. However, a range of sources indicates that throughout the period 1700-1900, women sang in parish Anglican choirs – albeit with frequent opposition. This thesis explores the significant yet contested role of female choristers in Church of England choirs during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It pays particular reference to a press controversy, led by the *Daily Telegraph* that broke out in 1889: the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate.

Chapter One surveys evidence for female choristers in parish Anglican churches during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sources including contemporary literature, visual representations, and Church of England Yearbook and Diocesan records all indicate that female singers were common in parish Anglican churches throughout this period. Chapter Two introduces the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate, exploring how an initially small disagreement over female choristers’ clothing developed into a controversy over whether women should sing in choirs at all. Chapter Three explores the intersections between the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate and contemporary gender politics. It argues that for many correspondents the female chorister was not a radical figure, but sat comfortably within the hegemonic Victorian ideal of angelic femininity. Chapter Four explores the significance of women in church choirs beyond gender politics. It argues that debates over female choristers often invoked issues as broad as class, national identity, and musical genre – even if these often remained unarticulated.

Two conclusions emerge. First, that female choristers had a far greater presence in the Victorian church than has often been recognized. Second, that twentieth century narratives of female absence from sacred music have roots in a complicated knot of nineteenth-century anxieties regarding female choristers. These anxieties extended beyond obvious questions of sex and gender to invoke other, equally significant concerns: unarticulated anxieties regarding Church, nation, and music.

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## List of Abbreviations

The Birmingham Daily Mail	BDM
The Birmingham Daily Post	BDP
The Daily Telegraph	DT
Dart	D
The Girl's Own Paper	GOP
Judy: The Conservative Comic	Ju
The Magazine of Music	MM
The Manchester Courier and Lancashire Gazette	MC
The Monthly Musical Record	MMR
The Musical Herald	MH
Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review	MO
The Musical Standard	MSt
The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular	MT
The Musical World	MW
The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art	SR
The Tonic Sol-Fa Reporter	TSFR
The Parish Choir	PC
The Woman's Penny Paper	WPP

## **Declaration**

This thesis extends the work of a dissertation completed as part of a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Cambridge History Faculty, 2013. As such, the two inevitably rely upon some of the same bibliographic material. However, the interpretations given to these sources in this work are new and differently formulated.

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*To G.B. and G.J.*  
*Women with a deep love of music*

## Introduction

### Narratives of Absence in Women's Musical History

The Anglican Choral Tradition is not an obvious place to go looking for women. When we imagine religious music, we generally think of successions of boy choristers, surpliced and chubby-cheeked. Recent moves to bring girls into English cathedrals have fostered the impression that church music's past has been overwhelmingly male. When Canterbury established a girls' choir at the beginning of this year, *The Guardian* observed that the development would 'make history by ending a tradition of male-only choral singing' that stretched back 'more than a thousand years'. Music journalist Ivan Hewitt echoed such language in the *Telegraph*: 'this Saturday, the 900-year tradition of male-only choirs at Canterbury Cathedral comes to an end'.<sup>1</sup>

This sense of a male choral heritage is as present in parish church music as it is in cathedral practice. We often hear male church choirs described as 'historic'. Parishes from Romsey Abbey in Hampshire, to Ss. Peter and Paul in Chingford, market themselves as maintaining a 'traditional choir of boys and men'.<sup>2</sup> The church of St Nicholas, North Walsham claims that it is 'unique among Parish Churches in Norfolk' for maintaining a male choir - a practice that, it contends, 'goes back to monastic times, and is one of the longest unbroken traditions in England'.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, female singers are cast as interlopers. In a 2013 editorial published in *The Telegraph*, Alan Titchmarsh remembered a time when 'every parish church and junior school would have a choir in which boys outnumbered girls'. Now, he lamented, 'in parish churches throughout the land you are far more likely to encounter half-a-dozen ladies of "a certain age"'.<sup>4</sup> Statements from the ultra-conservative Campaign for the Defence of the Traditional Cathedral Choir evince a similar, if more extreme, attitude. 'We are sacrificing a wonderful, ancient tradition of men and boys' choirs for political correctness', claimed spokesman Peter Giles in 2006. 'In 1963, there were 180,000 boys singing every

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<sup>1</sup>'Schoolgirls end Canterbury Cathedral tradition of male-only choral singing', *The Guardian*, 9 Jan 2014. Available online at <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/09/canterbury-cathedral-schoolgirls-end-tradition-male-only-choral-singing>> [accessed 26/09/14]; Ivan Hewitt, 'The history girls: Canterbury Cathedral's first girls' choir', *The Telegraph*, 23 Jan 2014. Available online at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/10588016/The-history-girls-Canterbury-Cathedrals-first-girls-choir.html>> [accessed 26/09/14].

<sup>2</sup>'Romsey Abbey Choir - a traditional choir of boys and men'. Available online at <<http://www.romseyabbey.org.uk/music/abbey-choir/>> [accessed 26/09/14]; 'Parish of Chingford - The Choir'. Available online at <[http://www.parishofchingford.org.uk/html/the\\_choir.html](http://www.parishofchingford.org.uk/html/the_choir.html)> [accessed 26/09/14].

<sup>3</sup>'St Nicholas Choir'. Available online at <<http://www.saint-nicholas.org.uk/music/st-nicholas-choir/>> [accessed 26/09/14].

<sup>4</sup> Alan Titchmarsh, 'Why are boy choristers a fading breed?', *The Telegraph*, 8 Jan 2013. Available online at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/9788236/Alan-Titchmarsh-why-are-boy-choristers-a-fading-breed.html>> [accessed 26/09/14].



Sunday in parish churches. Today there's hardly a boy singing'.<sup>5</sup>

Narratives of female exclusion from religious music dominate academic literature, as well as popular hearsay. For most of the twentieth century, female musicians were in fact practically absent from standard histories of the art form altogether - secular as well as sacred. In no small part, this resulted from wider assumptions regarding what constituted the history of music in the first place: a small canon of composers of 'exceptional' talent.<sup>6</sup> Conventional wisdom stated that women had not produced any art worthy of inclusion. Susan McClary recalled this attitude in 1993: 'I remember being told in graduate school at Harvard that if there *had* been women composers, we most assuredly would have heard of them; unfortunately...'<sup>7</sup>

Prompted by second wave feminism and its revolutionary impact elsewhere in the humanities, a small group of feminist musicologists began a recuperative mission from the late 1970s. They uncovered the work of several female composers, arguing that these women should take their places alongside the men of the canon. The most championed composers were Clara Schumann, Fanny Hensel, and Hildegard of Bingen.<sup>8</sup> Just as these studies started to gain momentum, however, work elsewhere in feminist musicology took a more radical turn. Attempts emerged not simply to restore female composers to the canon, but to revise what counted as 'musicianship' in the first place. Scholars such as Carol Neuls-Bates, Jane Bowers, and Judith Tick asserted the equal importance of musical performance and education alongside composition. They demonstrated that women's involvement in these fields was considerable. Thus works such as *Women in Music* (1982) and *Women Making Music* (1986) emphasised the degree to which women participated in a broad range of musical activities.<sup>9</sup> To date, the work has fostered a rich understanding of women's involvement in musical history.

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<sup>5</sup> The Campaign for the Defence of the Traditional Cathedral Choir is, as the name implies, primarily concerned with protecting all-male traditions of cathedral music. As in this example, though, the organisation frequently conflates this with parish music. See Peter Giles, cited in Stephen Tomkins, 'Singing from the same hymn sheet?', *BBC News*, 15 Nov 2006. Available online at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6149908.stm>> [accessed 26/09/14]. See also 'Campaign for Traditional Cathedral Choir (CTCC)'. Available online at <<http://www.ctcc.org.uk>> [accessed 26/09/14].

<sup>6</sup> A significant exception here is Sophie Drinker's, *Music and Women: the story of women in their relation to music* (1948) – notably written by a woman

<sup>7</sup> Susan McClary, 'Reshaping a Discipline: musicology and feminism in the 1990s', *Feminist Studies* 19:2 (1993): 399.

<sup>8</sup> Notable examples include Elizabeth Wood, 'Review Essay: Women in Music', *Signs* 6 (1980): 283-97; Nancy Reich, *Clara Schumann: the artist and the woman* (1985); Marcia J. Citron, *The Letters of Fanny Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn* (1987).

<sup>9</sup> Carol Neuls-Bates, *Women in Music: an anthology of course readings from the middle ages to the present* (1982); Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, *Women Making Music: the Western art tradition, 1150-1950* (1986).

Over the past forty years, then, feminist musicologists have made an effort to write female musicians back into musical history. The project, however, has not been without its flaws. Among these has been an overwhelmingly secular focus.

This emphasis is as old as feminist musicology. Carol Neuls-Bates's anthology included one chapter on 'Women as Singers in Christian Antiquity' before sidelining sacred music for the rest of the volume. Bowers and Tick explicitly state that women had been absent from religious music: 'the most important reason why women were not likely to compose music in the late fifteenth century stems from their exclusion from participation in church services'.<sup>10</sup> In the thirty years since their work was published, there have been few serious attempts to revise this narrative. With the exception of some detail on early modern convents, the revised 2001 edition of Karin Pendle's *Women and Music: A History* maintains the narrative of female absence from sacred music.<sup>11</sup> Particularly striking is Barbara Garvey Jackson's chapter on 'Musical Women of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', which states that 'only men and boys were allowed to be members of church choirs'. Jackson goes on to highlight 'the horror with which the church viewed mixing male and female voices'.<sup>12</sup> Further, in her notes she explicitly claims that women were excluded from parish church music throughout the modern period. 'In the eighteenth century,' Jackson writes, 'a Miss Steemson was organist at a parish church in Lancaster, England, and Ann Valentine was organist at St. Margaret's, Leicester. No women musicians appear again in English churches until the mid-nineteenth century'.<sup>13</sup> Pendle's edited volume remains one of the textbook works on women in Western musical history.

The exclusion narrative remains strong in John Potter and Neill Sorrell's *A History of Singing* (2012), published one decade later. Here, the authors confidently assert that the Church only considered equal rights for female musicians 'from the late twentieth century'.<sup>14</sup> So, too, does a history of female exclusion underpin the developing cross-discipline of feminist music theology. Heidi Epstein's *Melting the Venusberg* aims to expose the sexual semiotics of sacred musical rhetoric.<sup>15</sup> Yet while this work breaks ground in its gendered reading of Christian theologies of music, it, too, accepts as gospel the assumption that women have been widely excluded from sacred musical practice since the fourth century. As Epstein asserts, 'girls...were not to study

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<sup>10</sup> Bowers and Tick, *Women Making Music*, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Karin Pendle, 'Musical Women in Early Modern Europe', in Karin Pendle (ed.), *Women & Music: A History* (2001): 67-93.

<sup>12</sup> As with popular impressions of church music history, at several points it is not clear whether Jackson refers to cathedral, parish, or collegiate practice; she appears to conflate the three.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Garvey Jackson, 'Musical Women of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in Karin Pendle (ed.), *Women & Music*, pp. 99, 137n.2.

<sup>14</sup> John Potter and Neill Sorrell, *A History of Singing* (2012), p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> Heidi Epstein, *Melting the Venusberg: a feminist theology of music* (2004)

composition or music theory, nor to seek professional employment as musicians in church'. Throughout Epstein's book, female church musicians are conspicuous by their absence.<sup>16</sup>

Narratives of female exclusion from church singing persist through academic histories of women in music, as well as through popular impressions of parish choral traditions. One can speculate a range of reasons for their prevalence. Conflation of parish musical history with cathedral tradition has played a crucial role. Cathedral music has greater cultural visibility in the present and had a deeper-rooted tradition of male singers in the past. To this, one might add the influence of second-wave feminism. Drawing upon explicitly secular Marxist social theory, second-wave thinkers have overwhelmingly cast organized religion as inimical to women's agency.<sup>17</sup> More broadly across the humanities, the overwhelming dominance of the 'secularisation thesis', and subsequent portrayal of religion as an anachronistic hangover from pre-modern society, has likewise led those interested in 'modern' developments such as enlightened social emancipation to focus primarily on secular society.<sup>18</sup> In short, since the time of feminist musicology's formation, contemporary historiography and contemporary politics have both failed to take the Church seriously as a potential site for social progress. These lingering assumptions mean that textbook portrayals of women's exclusion from parish church music have yet to be interrogated. For a field with its origins in contesting narratives of absence, this is not without its irony.

### **Constructing a History of Women in Choirs**

Yet while both feminist musicologists and popular commentators assert women's absence from sacred music, several other scholars working in other areas have acknowledged that female singers have in fact had a presence in Anglican worship. Historians of church music, from Nicholas Temperley to Vic Gammon, have noted in passing the presence of female singers long before the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Women's

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<sup>16</sup> Epstein, *Melting the Venusberg*, pp. 53-56.

<sup>17</sup> A summary is provided in Rosi Braidotti's 'In Spite of the Times: the post secular turn in feminism', *Theory Culture Society* 25:6 (2008): 1-24. Such attitudes are typified by, for example, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (1949; trans. Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

<sup>18</sup> A summary of the historiography of secularization can be found in Jeremy Morris, 'Secularization and Religious Experience: arguments in the historiography of modern British religion', *Historical Journal* 55:1 (2012): 195-219.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church*. 2 vols. (1979), pp. 147, 154, 161, 162, 184, 185, 187-188, 216, 225, 281, 316, 319-320, 337. See also Dale Adelman, *The Contribution of Cambridge Ecclesiologists to the Revival of Anglican Choral Worship, 1839-62* (1997), p.79; William J. Gatens, *Victorian Cathedral Music in Theory and Practice* (1986), p. 43; Sally Drage, *The Performance of English Provincial Psalmody c.1690-1840*. PhD Thesis, University of Leeds (2009), pp. 84-92; Alan Mould, *The English Chorister: a history*

historian Timothy Willem Jones mentions debates over the use of female choristers in church music during the 1880's - though he incorrectly assumes that this was the first time women made an appearance.<sup>20</sup> With their main focuses elsewhere, these scholars understandably do not expand on these few glimpses of the female church musician. The most dedicated work on women choristers has come from the field of nineteenth century studies: a series of brief articles on female choristers by Walter Hillsman, and a book-length study of female organists by Judith Barger.<sup>21</sup>

Delving into the archives, it becomes clear that these brief mentions are in fact the tip of the iceberg. From the eighteenth century, and quite possibly earlier, women have not been absent from parish church music. They have not even been unusual. Literary and visual sources from the Georgian period display women singing alongside men. Victorian commentators talked of a time when female singers were widespread. In the late Victorian period, the Church of England started to record and publish detailed statistical records. These show that, by the close of the nineteenth century, 62,008 voluntary and 2,399 paid female singers were singing in choirs across the country. The numbers are striking when compared to the total number of nuns and deaconesses at this date – just 391 and 179 respectively.<sup>22</sup>

This thesis has two aims. First, it seeks to assert the continued presence of female singers in Anglican worship during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Using a range of materials, from literary accounts to artistic representations to archival records, Chapter One demonstrates that throughout the Georgian and Victorian periods women played a significant role in parish music. Sources from psalm books to paintings indicate that women sang alongside men in rural parish choirs throughout the eighteenth century. From the mid nineteenth century, the Tractarian movement promoted replacing mixed choirs with surpliced ensembles of men and boy trebles. Yet traditions of female choristers remained strong, and new High Church choral models were frequently adapted in order to retain female voices. Thus by the late nineteenth century, data from both Durham Diocesan Records and the *Official Yearbook of the Church of England* indicates that female choristers made up, on average, a quarter of

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(2007), pp.160-161; Bernarr Rainbow, *The Choral Revival in the Anglican Church, 1839-1872* (1970) pp. 76, 134n, 284, 320.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Willem Jones, "'Unduly Conscious of her Sex': priesthood, female bodies, and sacred space in the Church of England', *Women's History Review*, 21:4 (2012): 647.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Hillsman, 'Women in Victorian Church Music: their social, liturgical, and performing roles in Anglicanism', in *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Shiels and Diana Wood, *Studies in Church History* 27 (1990): 443-445; Walter Hillsman, 'Choirboys and Choirls in the Victorian Church of England', in *The Church and Childhood*, ed. Diana Wood, *Studies in Church History* 31 (1994): 447-460; Judith Barger, *Elizabeth Stirling and the Musical Life of Female Organists in Nineteenth Century England* (2007).

<sup>22</sup> Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, *The Official Yearbook of the Church of England* (1893), p. xvxx

all church singers nationwide. In some areas, the ratio bordered on 1:1. Women may have been written out of standard narratives of Anglican choral history, but historical records suggest otherwise.

The second aim of this thesis is to explore what female singers *meant*. For despite being widespread throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women choristers provoked unease. Throughout the Victorian century, periodicals frequently discussed whether female singers were appropriate for church music. Where female singers were used, their presence was often played down: women were treated as adjuncts, placed behind screens or at the back of the church. By the late nineteenth century, women's role as 'assistants' was epitomised by distinction in dress: men and boys wore uniformed surplices, while female choristers wore their own clothes. The continuing present-day denial of women's involvement in the Anglican choral tradition stands as part of a long history of unease regarding female singers in sacred settings. Today, as in the nineteenth century, women may have a presence in church choirs, but this presence is precarious.

To illustrate the problems and uncertainties that female choristers provoked, chapters two, three and four focus on one key moment in the history of women in sacred music: the summer of 1889. During August of this year, a press controversy concerning female choristers erupted in the correspondence pages of the *Daily Telegraph*. The debate was sparked by the radical decision, taken a few years earlier by a priest in Birmingham, to robe his female choristers. Letters initially focused on whether female choristers should wear a uniform, but soon broadened out to the question of whether women should sing in choirs at all. Titled 'An Angelic Quire: Ladies in Surplices', the debate saw the publication of eighty-nine letters in a single fortnight. The *Telegraph* was at this point the most widely read daily paper in Britain. This controversy in its pages therefore received comment across the British media. Publications from *The York Herald* to *Punch* to *The Woman's Penny Paper* dissected the 'Angelic Quire' debate as it unfurled.

The debate is interesting for several reasons. As one might expect, it revealed the blunt misogyny operating against women's involvement in sacred music. Correspondents dismissed female choristers as inappropriately sexual; as easily distracted; as primarily interested in 'showing off' their voices to the congregation. But the 'Angelic Quire' debate also raised more nuanced questions regarding woman's status in nineteenth century culture. Chapter Three explores attempts by supporters of female choristers to place woman singers within the nineteenth century's dominant framework of 'angelic' womanhood. It argues that advocates of women in church choirs did not seek radically to challenge late Victorian gender ideology. Rather, they sought to reassert female choristers' compatibility with hegemonic gender ideology.

Yet the debate concerned more than simply womanhood. A close reading of the ‘Angelic Quire’ correspondence reveals that attitudes towards female choristers were bound up debates far beyond late Victorian feminism. The question of whether women should sing in Anglican choirs concerned music, denominational politics, sacred iconography, and English national identity. Chapter Four explores recurrent concerns during the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate that female choristers would turn churches into erotically-charged ‘concert halls’. These fears expressed more than an aversion to female sexuality. They displayed a deep-seated unease with the world of professional music – a world full, in correspondents’ imaginations, of Catholics, aristocrats, Royalists, atheists, and moral decay. Debates over gender may have been central to the ‘Angelic Quire’ controversy, but they were not uniquely so. Rather, they sat embedded in a web of concerns also at stake in nineteenth century culture.

Therefore, as Jean Boydston has observed, even where gender may appear ‘to rise to primacy as an expression of social position and positioning...it is always gender as nested in, mingled with, and inseparable from the cluster of other factors socially relevant in a given culture’.<sup>23</sup>

If the 1889 brouhaha about female choristers concerned far more than simply gender politics, so does the silence of contemporary scholarship. Modern narratives of women’s absence, like Victorian debates over their presence, have been informed by a range of unarticulated concerns and problems that come together in discussions of English choral music. Titchmarsh’s lament that twenty-first century choirs are the preserve of ‘ladies “of a certain age”’ is certainly loaded with sexist condescension. However, in his lament that boy choristers are ‘a fading breed’, one might equally observe a sadness at the encroaching secularization of British culture. One might read his article as an archetypal piece of declinism, a nostalgia for the (mythical) time when British choral music was the jewel of Europe and of Empire. One might even discern in Titchmarsh’s words a sense of personal dislocation; modern youth culture has evolved away from his own boyhood experiences: ‘Is it the Xboxes and PlayStations that are keeping them away from the choirstalls?’<sup>24</sup>

Both Victorian discussions concerning female church singers and the modern narratives that deny such singers’ existence highlight the degree to which women’s inclusion and exclusion from the sphere of sacred music has been governed by a knot of complicated, unarticulated, and often unexpected concerns. This thesis seeks to unpick these anxieties in order to understand more both about late nineteenth century Britain,

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<sup>23</sup> Jean Boydston, ‘Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis’, *Gender & History* 20:3 (2008): 576.

<sup>24</sup> Titchmarsh, ‘Fading breed’ (2013).

and women in sacred music more generally. This is a story about sexual politics, but also about music, denominations, and class. It is about iconography, national identity, and regional politics. Above all, it is about the ways in which female choristers, present in English churches since the eighteenth century, came to be so controversial by 1889, yet subsequently faded almost completely from memory.

## Chapter One

### **A Survey of Female Participation in Parish Church Music, c. 1700-1900**

This chapter surveys women's participation in Anglican parish church music over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As we shall see, evidence from a broad range of sources suggests that mixed-sex choirs were common throughout this period. Contrary to widespread narratives of women's exclusion, female singers have long maintained a significant presence in parish music.

The extent of this presence varied across the period. For most of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, mixed-sex choirs were relatively common across the country. This changed from the 1840s, when High Church reformers instigated a radical reconceptualisation of church music. Among other changes, churches began to employ 'surpliced' choirs of men and boys – the choirs that have come to dominate our historical imagination. By the late nineteenth century, these choral reforms had spread across the country. Yet although male 'surpliced' choirs had achieved a significant hold by the late nineteenth century, mixed choirs remained relatively common, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, many parishes that chose to institute High Church choral principles nevertheless decided to retain female singers as adjuncts to male and boy choristers.

There was not a point during this period when women did not, at least somewhere in the country, have a significant presence in Anglican choral worship. Where female singers appeared, they did so with a wealth of history and tradition behind them. Nonetheless, female choristers were also frequently criticized and – from the 1840s – replaced. Appreciating these facts is crucial to understanding the arguments that broke out in 1889.

### **The Cathedral Heritage**

Before we consider women's involvement in church music, though, let us first make clear that there were spaces in which women *did not* sing. Throughout most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a starker difference existed between parish and cathedral music than exists today. The two indeed operated largely autonomously from one another, developing their own conventions and musical styles. Crucially, Anglican cathedrals, unlike parish choirs, do not appear to have used female choristers on any regular basis. Narratives of female exclusion from parish choirs conflate this genuine masculine heritage with parish singing's mixed-gender legacy.



The use of boy trebles in English cathedrals stretches back at least as far as 1091, when their use at Exeter was first recorded. By the end of the thirteenth century, sources confirm that boys' voices were heard in all nine secular cathedrals in the country.<sup>1</sup> During this time, female religious singing was cultivated in convents and nunneries. However, once these were abandoned in the 1336 Dissolution, there remained no strongholds of all-female sacred music to match the already centuries-old male cathedral tradition.

It is beyond the scope of this study to determine in any detail whether cathedral tradition was indeed as all-male as secondary accounts suggest. Nonetheless, an initial survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practice generally confirms that women remained excluded from cathedral choirs throughout this period. This is not to say that women *never* sang in cathedrals. In 1772, the *Gloucester Journal* reported on the use of six female choristers in Gloucester cathedral during the Three Choirs Festival, whose 'exact and spirited accompaniment...added greatly to the grandeur of the several choruses',<sup>2</sup> Yet the women sang at a festival, not during a religious service. Even then, this was an exception rather than the rule; there are very few references from this period to women singing in cathedrals in any capacity.

Nonetheless, the idea of women singing in cathedrals was sufficiently acceptable for female choristers to be used at Westminster Abbey for Queen Victoria's coronation in 1838. According to press reports, twenty-seven female singers performed, albeit following 'considerable difficulties' in gaining the Bishop of London's approval.<sup>3</sup> A letter from the celebration's director of music, Sir George Smart, hints that the decision was justified on the grounds of ensuring the best possible sound, (the 'English singers' are presumably mixed-sex):

At the last coronation, the choir was by no means sufficiently powerful. It ought certainly to be increased on the occasions of the approaching solemnity. I see no other mode of doing this effectively than that of engaging the services of some of our best English singers, and of our certain number of chorus singers, in addition to members of the choir.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Boynton, 'Boy Singers in Monasteries and Cathedrals', in *Young Choristers, 650-1700*, ed. Susan Boynton and Eric Rice (2008), pp. 37-43; Mould, *The English Chorister*, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Mould, *The English Chorister*, pp.160-161.

<sup>3</sup> 'Domestic Intelligence' *The Manchester Times and Gazette*, 26 May 1838; 'Domestic News', *The Bradford Observer* (Bradford, England), 7 June 1838.

<sup>4</sup> Letter in National Archives to C. Grenville esq. from Sir George Smart, dated 16/4/1838. National Archives, C/195/2/35.

In addition to participating in the coronation, during the 1860s female singers also regularly supplemented the St. Paul's cathedral choir during Sunday evening services.<sup>5</sup> On several occasions, commentators floated the idea of employing women at cathedrals, arguing that this could improve musical standards. In 1843, *The Musical World* advocated engaging female contraltos in response to the scarcity of male countertenors.<sup>6</sup> By 1864 female singers appear to have been suggested as a remedy for the 'notoriously inferior condition' of Durham Cathedral choir.<sup>7</sup> Five years later, several correspondents wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* to suggest that female choristers be installed at Manchester Cathedral.<sup>8</sup>

Of course there is a significant difference between a layman advocating the use of female choristers in cathedrals, and this suggestion actually being implemented. Nonetheless, cumulatively these scattered pieces of evidence indicate that the use of female singers, while far from common, was not inconceivable within a cathedral context. It would be worth conducting further research to determine whether women did in fact play a role, however small, in the musical life of the mid-nineteenth century Anglican cathedral. For the time being, however, all evidence suggests that Anglican cathedral music was an overwhelmingly male domain – though not, perhaps, exclusively.

### **West Gallery Psalmody, c. 1690-1830**

Men may have dominated cathedral singing, but life was different in the parishes. As we noted in the introduction, several previous studies have already uncovered clear instances of female participation in Anglican parish church music.

Nicholas Temperley's *The Music of the English Parish Church* is particularly illuminating in this regard. Temperley cites Playford's collection of psalms from 1677, which suggested that any part could be sung an octave higher by 'boys or women'. He further observes that a 1699 psalm collection from Lancashire explicitly specified that treble parts could be sung by singers of either sex, depicting women in its frontispiece.<sup>9</sup> Sally Drage has built on Temperley's work by uncovering an 'Old List of Singers' from Oldham, dated 1728, which mentions a top line of seven women alongside three boy trebles. Drage also notes two examples of female choristers from Sussex. In 1727, a

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<sup>5</sup> John C. Chevely, 'Female Choristers', *MSt* 6:144 (1867): 283.

<sup>6</sup> A Lover of Cathedral Music, 'The Contralto Voice', *MW* 18:33 (1843): 277.

<sup>7</sup> A. Schoolmaster, 'A Few Words with the New Patron of Lady-Choristers', *MSt* 3:57 (1864): 148-149.

<sup>8</sup> 'Correspondence', *MC*, 12-29 Sep 1869.

<sup>9</sup> Temperley, *Parish Church Music*, pp. 147, 154. See also pp. 161-162, 216.

gallery was built in the church of St. Nicholas, Itchingfield, ‘wholly for the use of the women singers’. Meanwhile, records from the church of St. Giles, Bodiam show that in the same year, ‘women singers’ were given permission to sit in the pew typically reserved for the vicars’ servants. One hundred years later, an early nineteenth century churchwardens’ book from Clovelly, North Devon, catalogued the parish’s female choir members: ‘a sempstess, two daughters of one of the masons and his niece, a butcher’s daughter, a shopkeeper’s daughter, a carpenter’s daughter, and a groom’s wife’.<sup>10</sup>

I have found several literary references from the late Georgian period that reinforce previously uncovered evidence of female parish choristers. In *The Torrington Diaries*, published 1792, travel writer John Byng noted ‘singing from about a dozen voices, male and female’ at a church in Yorkshire.<sup>11</sup> Five years later, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* spoke of a ‘well-instructed choir’ in Whilton, Northamptonshire, consisting of ‘young women in the organ-gallery, and of men in an opposite one’.<sup>12</sup> In a brief description of an English church choir in *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1820), American essayist Washington Irving also described ‘two or three pretty faces among the female singers’. The painting that Webster later based on this vignette, ‘The Village Choir’ (1847), depicts three adolescent girls at the front of the church’s west gallery, as well as a bonneted older woman in the background (see Figure 1).

Accurately gauging the extent of mixed choirs during this period is made difficult by a lack of detailed church records. Since much of the evidence for female choristers is piecemeal, Sally Drage has been wary of emphasizing their presence. Drage argues that male singers most likely dominated musical practice, speculating that mixed choirs were primarily a ‘northern’ innovation.<sup>13</sup>

Drage’s reluctance is understandable given the limited evidence in the contemporary sources she cites. If one looks further afield, though, it becomes clear that she has greatly understated the numbers of women singing in eighteenth-century choirs. Retrospectives written by nineteenth-century journalists testify to the prevalence of female singers before 1830. ‘It is not very many years since the use of “woman trebles” was almost universal in Lancashire’ observed one Manchester commentator in 1869.<sup>14</sup> ‘Until a comparatively recent period’ wrote a correspondent to the *Musical Standard* in

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<sup>10</sup> Drage, *English Provincial Psalmody*, pp. 88-92.

<sup>11</sup> John Byng, 5th Viscount Torrington, *The Torrington Diaries*, ed. C.B. & Fanny Andrews (1954), p. 277.

<sup>12</sup> Mr. Urban, ‘Solemnity in Church Worship’, *The Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, 67:5 (1797): 932.

<sup>13</sup> Drage, *English Provincial Psalmody*, p. 86.

<sup>14</sup> Cantor, ‘Our Church Services’, *MC*, 16 Sep 1869.



**Figure 1:** Thomas Webster, *A Village Choir* (1847), oil on panel. Victorian and Albert Museum, London. Available online at <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/937>> [accessed 27/09/14].

1870, ‘the employment of female trebles in our churches was almost universal’. In 1889, another *Standard* correspondent declared that the ‘substitution of boys’ voices for those of women’ was ‘not one of the least important changes’ that had recently occurred in Anglican music.<sup>15</sup> Of course, it is worth bearing in mind that these accounts generally came with an agenda – either celebrating or denigrating mid-Victorian reforms. Even considering possible exaggeration, though, the sources indicate that women and girl singers were relatively common at least until the early decades of the nineteenth century – a time well within the living memory both of these authors, and of their audience.

In order to understand how female singers came to be so widespread, one must first understand the broader context of eighteenth-century church music. ‘West Gallery psalmody’, as the period’s dominant style is now known, differed both from eighteenth century cathedral traditions and from nineteenth century parish music. These distinctions were crucial in shaping the eighteenth century parish church’s relatively welcoming attitude towards female singers.

<sup>15</sup> R. B. D., ‘Women and Boys in Church Choirs’, *MSt* 37:1307 (1889): 130-132.

Drage dates the origins of West Gallery psalmody to the late seventeenth century, when a contingent of High Church reformers promoted the use of small groups of singers at the back end of the church to sing during services. The music that subsequently developed had considerably more in common with secular dance and folk styles than it did with other contemporary religious styles, and singers were generally accompanied by 'parish bands' of string and woodwind instruments. These folk influences brought with them a strong emphasis on aural dissemination and improvisation, and exact styles varied considerably by region. Practice in urban churches was different. There, groups of 'charity' children from orphanages led the congregation in singing psalms, accompanied by an organ.<sup>16</sup> What follows focuses on rural practice; in the eighteenth century, this still made up the majority of parishes.

There are a variety of reasons why female singers may have appeared more acceptable in a rural church in the eighteenth-century than they would later on. Foremost among these is the question of what was realistic. Evidently, village churches would have had nothing approaching the resources available to cathedrals and collegiate foundations to train boy choristers. Employing women may have been the only feasible way to secure a treble line.

The use of women in choirs was most likely cultural, as well as practical. The social origins of many of these singers played a crucial role. As the 'folky' style of much rural psalmody indicates, most country churches' musicians belonged to the lower orders of society.<sup>17</sup> We might recall the list of woman singers from Clovelly: 'a butcher's daughter, a shopkeeper's daughter, a carpenter's daughter...' None of these were high social ranks. Many scholars have observed that the dominance of household economic structures among labourers and artisans afforded women considerably more agency than they would claim later in the nineteenth century, once the discourse of 'separate spheres' had started to take a hold on English culture.<sup>18</sup> Where working men and women were accustomed to sharing economic duties, sharing responsibility for musical worship did not seem odd or unnatural.

Despite their prevalence, female choristers also had their critics. Female musical performance was decried as exposing and undignified - a brazen display of female sexuality. Musician John Latrobe, writing in 1831, worried that 'the association of idle,

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<sup>16</sup> Drage, *English Provincial Psalmody*, pp. 45-52; Temperley, *Parish Church Music*, pp. 124-129.

<sup>17</sup> Vic Gammon, "'Babylonian Performances': the Rise and Suppression of Popular Church Music, 1660-1870", in *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914*, ed. E. and S. Yeo (1981): 62-88.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (1987); Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (1992); Anna Clarke, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (1997).

thoughtless, and wanton characters of both sexes in the choral service, can only afford a temptation to flightiness and folly, not to say, vice and immorality'.<sup>19</sup> A few years earlier, religious journalist Lucy Cameron had explored similar themes in a short story titled *The Singing Gallery* (1823). The tale, aimed at a mass audience, sees heroine Mrs. Read attempting to eradicate flirting among members of her parish's choir. Attending the gallery, Mrs. Read observes behaviour that makes her feel 'so much grieved' that she 'could frequently have shed tears; to see the sanctuary of God so profaned'. She later invites the women of the choir to tea in order to explain the evil of their ways, while the vicar deals with the men. Such is the improvement that by the end the choir sing 'not only with their lips, but with their hearts'. Likely drawing on Cameron's own experiences as the wife of a curate in charge of a parish chapel in Shropshire, the tale clearly demonstrates the concerns that could accompany a mixed-gender choir.<sup>20</sup>

Like female presence or absence in cathedral choirs, the status of female singers in West Gallery psalmody could benefit from further research. For the time being, however, we can conclude that female choristers were relatively common - possibly out of necessity, but possibly, too, out of a genuine respect for their voices. This situation continued until the mid nineteenth century, when High Church reformers promoted the exchange of 'West Gallery' singers for new, 'surpliced' choirs as part of a wide-ranging reconceptualisation of church music.

### **The Anglican Choral Revival and Congregational Singing, c.1830-1850**

The groundwork for this upheaval had been laid long beforehand. Even during its eighteenth-century heyday, parish psalmody was often accused of being 'coarse' and 'unmusical'. These attacks – as rooted in class prejudice as in aesthetics - intensified with the growth of Evangelical Christianity. Music in country churches, complained one Lewes minister in 1811, 'frequently consists of a jargon of sounds, destitute of harmony, melody, or any other laudable recommendation to the utter destruction of solemnity and devotion'.<sup>21</sup> The distorted faces and pained expressions of singers depicted in

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<sup>19</sup> Latrobe, *The Music of the Church Considered in its Various Branches, Congregational and Choral: an Historical and Practical Treatise for the General Reader* (1831), p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> Temperley, *Parish Church Music*, p. 162.

<sup>21</sup> Vic Gammon, 'Problems in the Performance and Historiography of English Popular Church Music', *Radical Musicology* 1 (2006), available online at <<http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk/2006/Gammon.htm>> [accessed 27/09/14]



Samuel H. Grimm's print 'Village Choir', c. 1770, offer a visual suggestion of the music's unpleasantness (see figure 2).<sup>22</sup>

Evangelical reformers made some attempts to reform parish music - part of their wider project to fight 'irreverence' within the British church. But their impact was slight. Real change only occurred with the emergence of the Tractarian movement during the 1840's. This saw High Church reformers instigate a wholesale reform of parish music.



**Figure 2:** Grimm, Samuel H., *Village Choir* (1770), print. Available online at <http://www.wgma.org.uk/Resources/WG%20in%20Art.htm> [accessed 27/09/14].

The Tractarian Movement sought to recognise the Church of England's Catholic heritage. The group understood the English Church to occupy a *via media* between the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Over the course of the mid nineteenth century, Tractarian reformers attempted to remake the church along these lines. Crucial to this movement was an attempt to restore 'ritual' practices to the church. Supporters variously advocated the re-introduction of chancels, Eucharistic vestments, Mariolatry, and – in what was known as the 'choral revival' – the 'choral service'.<sup>23</sup>

This 'choral service' was almost unrecognizable next to eighteenth century church music. According to its advocates, it descended from an ancient Judeo-Christian

<sup>22</sup> Grimm, Samuel H., *Village Choir* (1770), print. Available online at <http://www.wgma.org.uk/Resources/WG%20in%20Art.htm> [accessed 27/09/14].

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, James Bentley, *Ritualism and Politics in Victorian Britain* (1978); Nigel Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain, 1830-1910* (1999).

tradition of musical worship. Crucially, the tradition was congregational. The *Parish Choir* magazine, dedicated voice of the music reform movement, defined an ideal choral service as

that mode of celebrating the public service by both priest and people, in which they sing all portions allotted to each respectively, so as to make one continued psalm of praise, confession, and intercession from beginning to end.<sup>24</sup>

It is crucial to understand what this focus on ‘congregational’ singing meant, since the ideal greatly informed Tractarian models of the choir. The importance of congregational singing had been acknowledged long before the ‘choral revival’. Parishioner participation in Church music had been considered essential throughout the eighteenth century. By the 1840s, however, the practice appears to have fallen into decline – if, indeed, it had ever been healthy. In 1790, the Bishop of London, Beliby Porteus, had in fact noted that no other aspect of the Anglican service was ‘at so low an ebb’.<sup>25</sup>

High Church reformers envisaged a full-scale reinvigoration of congregational singing. Each issue of the *Parish Choir* teemed with articles concerning how best to encourage parishioner participation. Over the course of the 1840s, there developed a particular emphasis on Gregorian Chant – attractive not simply due to its ancient heritage, but due to a general impression that the style was easy, accessible, and ‘conducive to congregational participation’.<sup>26</sup>

Reformers were motivated not only by historical precedents for congregational singing, but also by the increasingly common belief that group singing benefitted moral and physical health. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the idea that regular musical practice could improve well-being had become prominent. Manuals such as J. Fothergill’s *Rules for the Preservation of Health* (1762) and J. Mackenzie’s *The History of Health, and the Art of Preserving It* (1760) recommended music as a form of healthy exercise. Author Charles Avison extolled music’s ability to raise the ‘sociable and happy passions and to subdue contrary ones’.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, S.A.D. Tissot praised music’s ability to ‘encourage virtue, still passions, and heal moral and physical sickness’.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rainbow, *Choral Revival*, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Temperley, *Parish Church Music*, pp. 124-129.

<sup>26</sup> *The Ecclesiologist*, 1854, cited in Adelman, *Cambridge Ecclesiologists* p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Avison, quoted in Gatens, *Victorian Cathedral Music*, p. 36; James Kennaway, ‘From Sensibility to Pathology: the Origins of the Idea of Nervous Music around 1800’, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 65:3 (2010): 403.

<sup>28</sup> S. A. D. Tissot, quoted in Kennaway, ‘Sensibility to Pathology’, 404.



The idea that music was ‘healthy’ remained strong by the mid-nineteenth century. Around the time of the choral revival, it combined with another, newer preoccupation: ‘rational recreation’. Over the course of the 1840s, it became particularly fashionable for middle- and upper-class citizens to give time to ‘improving’ the lives of the newly-urbanised workforce. Across English cities, initiatives developed to provide ‘pleasurable, profitable, and healthful exertion’ to ease the pains of industrialization. This preoccupation with improving labourers’ lives, combined with the belief that music was healthy, sparked a new phenomenon: musical philanthropy.<sup>29</sup>

Musical philanthropy meant more than free concerts, though these were plentiful. One of musical philanthropists’ core beliefs was that beneficiaries should themselves participate in music. Urban working class culture was in fact already very musical, but folk styles did not fit philanthropists’ definitions of ‘art’. The desire to get labourers singing more edifying music led to the widespread development of sight-reading classes, several of which were supported by the state. Three men principally led this sight-singing movement: Joseph Mainzer, a German émigré who had first pioneered his ‘sight-singing’ method in Paris; John Hullah, a music teacher from Worcestershire who imported the techniques of Parisian teacher G.L.B. Wilhelm; and Revd. John Curwen, who adapted a system developed by Sarah Ann Glover into what is now known as the Tonic Sol-fa method.<sup>30</sup>

Together, these three men created what historian Percy Scholes has described as a ‘most extraordinary mania’ for sight-singing’ (‘mania’, he insists, ‘is not too strong a word’).<sup>31</sup> A bill read to the House of Lords in July 1842 stated that by that point, Hullah’s classes alone had enrolled 50,000 people, just eighteen months after they had begun.<sup>32</sup> Crucially, many of these students were teachers at provincial schools, institutes, or Sunday Schools. Following graduation, they disseminated Hullah’s methods across the country through their own teaching. By 1845, Robert Druitt observed that ‘both the taste for music, and the means of learning it, have been widely

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<sup>29</sup> William Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* (1842), p. 129. For more detail on the rational recreation movement, see Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (1978). For an overview of musical philanthropy in particular, see Charles Edward McQuire, *Music and Victorian Philanthropy: the Tonic Sol-Fa Movement* (2009).

<sup>30</sup> Russell, *Popular Music*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>31</sup> Percy Scholes, quoted in Gatens, *Victorian Cathedral Music*, p. 39.

<sup>32</sup> Rainbow, *Choral Revival*, p.47

extended of late years: insomuch as there are few families, above the poorest orders, some member of which cannot play or sing'.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore by the time Tractarian reformers started to encourage congregational singing, there also existed an extraordinarily wide-reaching movement to develop singing among the general population. This not only advocated the potential health benefits of regular singing, but also made full congregational singing appear a plausible aim.

Yet even helped by these developments, church music reformers soon found the congregational ideal difficult to implement. In particular, most parishioners found plainchant unfamiliar and intimidating, despite reformers' repeated assertions that it was easy to learn.<sup>34</sup> Reformers suggested weekly rehearsals, but admitted that these were unlikely to work. As one High Churchman, W. H. Plumstead noted, 'there might be a difficulty at first to make people generally understand the necessity of the duty'.<sup>35</sup>

To encourage congregational singing, *The Parish Choir* recommended that churches establish a choir. Ideally, this would consist of 'a few good voices, properly trained and superintended, to lead the congregation'.<sup>36</sup> Advocates hoped that such a group, placed either in the chancel or among the congregation, would set a musical example for the rest of the congregation. The principal function of the choir, as understood by Tractarian reformers, was to lead congregational singing.

Yet everyone but choral hardliners agreed that choirs also had a second role. Towards the end of the service, they were tasked with singing an anthem. This was to be chosen from among the 'grandest and most artistic compositions' in the history of English sacred music.<sup>37</sup> According to reformers, such pieces praised God by offering up some of the most 'sublime' music in existence. The congregation, though silent, participated by listening.

Therefore the Tractarian choir had a split purpose. At times, it led the congregation in song – guiding, rather than dominating. At others, its singers claimed focus, offering

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Druitt, *A Popular Tract on Church Music, with Remarks on its Moral and Political Importance and a Practical Scheme for its Reformation* (1845), p. 7

<sup>34</sup> Martin Clarke, "'Meet and Right it is to Sing": Nineteenth-Century Hymnals and the Reasons for Singing', in *Music and Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Martin Clarke (2013), pp. 31-32.

<sup>35</sup> W. H. Plumstead, *Observations on the Present state of Congregational Singing, with a Plan, and Suggestions for its General Encouragement and Improvement, etc.*, p. 19

<sup>36</sup> 'The Society for Promoting Church Music', *The Parish Choir* 1:1 (1846): 1.

<sup>37</sup> *The Ecclesiologist*, cited in Adelman, *Cambridge Ecclesiologists*, p. 75.

their more skilled voices as higher expressions of praise. These two understandings of Church music co-existed within the Anglican choral revival.

This new model of the choir brought with it several material changes. Choirs changed location: from the West Gallery, to the chancel. Choirs were dressed in uniform white robes, or 'surplices'. Most significantly, as we will see, female singers were excluded. Instead, the top line was sung by young boy trebles.

### **Women in Church Music, c.1850-1900**

Over the second half of the nineteenth century, the Tractarian choral model spread throughout England.<sup>38</sup> Its dissemination was not uncontested. Arguments between clergyman and former choir members marked the period 1830-1860; village feuds and street fights were a common sight.<sup>39</sup>

Initially, Tractarian practices spread slowly. Mackeson's *Guide to the Church Services of London* (1859) noted only fourteen out of 264 central London parishes had surpliced choirs. In the suburbs, the figure was six out of 151.

By the later nineteenth century, however, the proportion of male surpliced choirs was considerable. By 1870, 21% of churches in greater London and 50% in Birmingham possessed a surpliced choir. By 1884, the London figure totalled 57%.<sup>40</sup> The previous year, a *Quaver* correspondent noted an 'extensive movement...in favour of male surpliced choirs'.<sup>41</sup> By 1887, *Musical Times* had observed that England was seeing 'everywhere the disappearance...of "mixed choirs"'.<sup>42</sup>

The *Official Yearbook of the Church of England* gives a clear record of the number of female choristers for the years 1893 to 1909. During these years, this publication included annual figures detailing the numbers of paid and voluntary male and female singers in the Anglican Church, broken down according to diocese.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, in the case of male singers it is not possible to distinguish between those who sang as part of a surpliced, 'ritualist' choir and those who sang as part of older, 'West Gallery' traditions. Therefore we cannot use this source to explore the relative numbers of men

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<sup>38</sup> For more detail on the spread of ritualism, see Nigel Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain, 1830-1910* (2000).

<sup>39</sup> Gammon, 'Popular Funeral Practices', 440.

<sup>40</sup> Temperley, *Parish Church Music*, pp. 278-9.

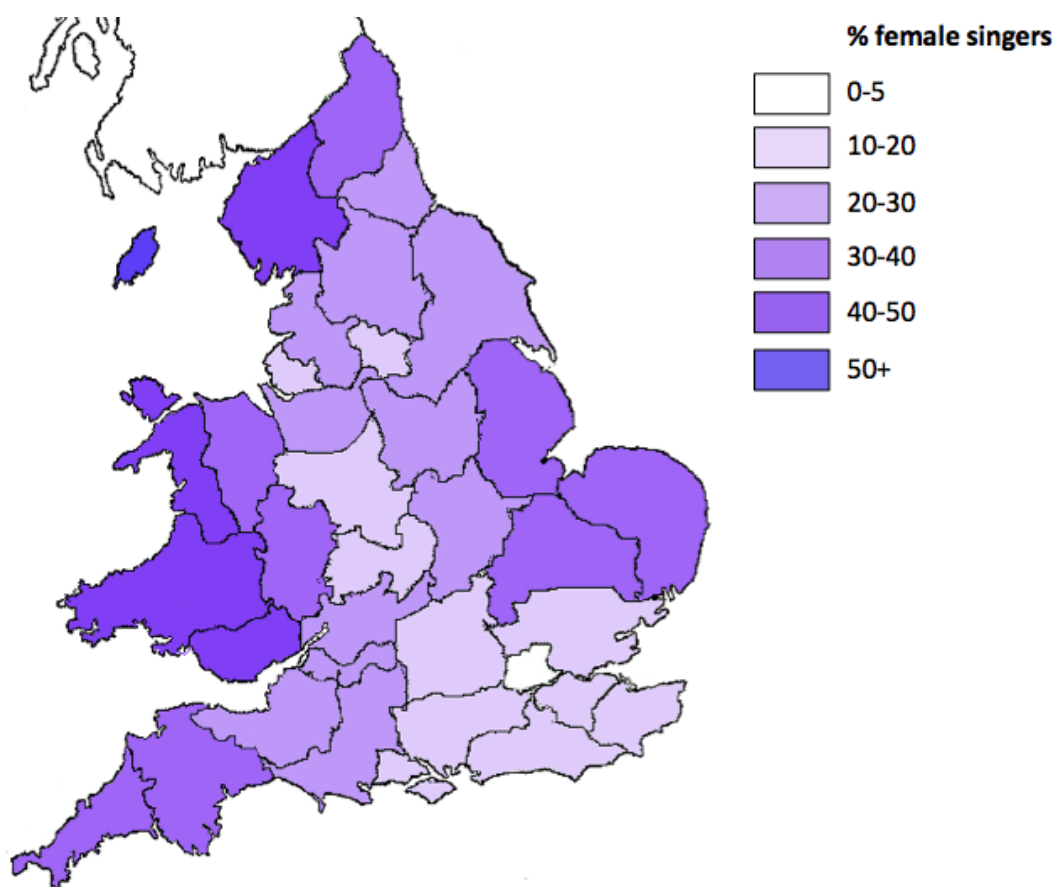
<sup>41</sup> Turpin, 'Female Singers in Church Choirs', Q 92 (1883): 189.

<sup>42</sup> Cantab, 'Employment of Female Voices in Church Choirs', MT 28:527 (1887): 49.

<sup>43</sup> Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, *The Official Year-Book of the Church of England* (1893-1906).

in each genre. However, the figures do clearly indicate the extent to which women remained part of parish music.

Notably, over the fourteen years they cover, the *Yearbook* records do not display any significant changes in the number of female singers, either at a local or at a national level. Possibly the majority of upheavals had already occurred by this point. However, the figures do offer a fascinating window onto the regional spread of female choristers. This is displayed in figures three and four.



**Figure 3:** Map showing percentage of female singers across England and Wales, based on aggregate data from the Church of England Yearbooks, 1893-1906.

Diocese	% Female	Diocese	% Female	Diocese	% Female
<b>Sodor and Man</b>	53.1	<b>Bath &amp; Wells</b>	27.0	<b>Worcester</b>	18.3
<b>St. David's</b>	47.1	<b>Durham</b>	25.6	<b>Lichfield</b>	16.1
<b>Carlisle</b>	46.2	<b>Manchester</b>	25.3	<b>Chichester</b>	14.9
<b>Bangor</b>	45.2	<b>Peterborough</b>	24.6	<b>Wakefield</b>	14.0
<b>Llandaff</b>	42.6	<b>Gloucester</b>	24.1	<b>Birmingham</b>	12.5
<b>Norwich</b>	38.6	<b>Ripon</b>	23.1	<b>Rochester</b>	11.6
<b>Truro</b>	38.2	<b>York</b>	23.0	<b>Southwark</b>	10.2
<b>St. Asaph</b>	37.7	<b>Liverpool</b>	19.9	<b>Bristol</b>	8.8
<b>Newcastle</b>	32.2	<b>St. Albans</b>	19.7	<b>London</b>	8.4
<b>Hereford</b>	31.9	<b>Chester</b>	19.7		
<b>Lincoln</b>	31.5	<b>Oxford</b>	19.6		
<b>Ely</b>	30.8	<b>Southwell</b>	19.5		
<b>Exeter</b>	30.4	<b>Winchester</b>	18.7		
<b>Salisbury</b>	29.6	<b>Canterbury</b>	18.6	<b>Average</b>	25.2

**Figure 4:** Percentage of female singers across England and Wales as table, based on aggregate data from the Church of England Yearbooks, 1893-1906.

As one can see, by the late nineteenth century female singers were most popular in the northern, eastern, and southwestern extremities of the country. Women formed 46% of choir members in Carlisle, 39% in Norwich, and 38% in Truro. The gender balance was almost equal in most Welsh dioceses. Female singers were considerably less common in the south east and in the midlands. Women counted for just 16% of total singers in Lichfield, 15% in Chichester, and 12% in both Rochester and Birmingham. In the capital women were almost entirely absent, making up 8.4% of singers in the City and 10% of those in the suburban diocese of Southwark.

The overall picture is clear. Women choristers were less common in wealthier, more developed areas of the country. They maintained a better footing in the peripheries.

A second revealing perspective on women in choirs can be found in the parish visitation records kept in the Durham diocesan archives.<sup>44</sup> These records preserve the responses

<sup>44</sup> Durham Diocesan Clergy Visitation Returns 1882-1886, held in Durham Diocese Records of Visitation and Oversight. Durham University Library Special Collections (Durham, UK). Ref. DDR/EV/RET/1882, DDR/EV/RET/1886.

of incumbent vicars to standardised questionnaires sent out by the local bishop, generally enquiring into the health and operations of their parish. Most surveys were too vague to yield meaningful insight into specific matters such as choral arrangements. Nonetheless, Durham surveys from 1882 and 1886 included a number of exceptionally specific prompts, among them ‘what arrangements do you have regarding your choir?’ and ‘is it surpliced?’

Not every incumbent completed these questions. When they did, their answers varied from two or three words to long, descriptive paragraphs. When considered in aggregate, though, these survey responses offer a wealth of information concerning the choral composition of the 216 parishes that at up the Durham diocese during the 1880s.

The first observation we can make is that the balance between mixed-sex and male choirs across the diocese of Durham was relatively even. Among those returns that state their choirs’ gender, male choirs made up 56.8% of the total in 1882 and 57.4% in 1886. Meanwhile, the percentage of ‘surpliced’ choirs was slightly smaller: 40.0% in 1882 and 55.6% in 1886. Due both to the time gap and the fact that these figures relate to choirs rather than individual singers, it is difficult to compare this information with *Church of England Yearbook* statistics. However, the data from each source are not obviously inconsistent with one another.

Second, we can observe that across the two datasets, momentum was clearly in favour of male surpliced choirs. One can identify eleven individual parishes with a change from a non-surpliced or ‘mixed’ choir, to a ‘surpliced’ choir at some point between the 1882 and 1886 returns. By contrast, it is not possible to identify any choirs that went the other way.

Various comments from individuals also suggest that surpliced male choirs were expanding across the diocese. In 1882, choristers at All Saint’s, Penshaw and at St Cuthbert’s, Bensham had been ‘recently habited’ in surplices. Following their introduction, the latter parish had seen a larger congregation and ‘more orderly’ singers. The vicar of St Paul’s, Water Houses, ‘[hoped] to get the boys surpliced’ in 1882; one church in Stockton upon Tees had plans to introduce surpliced men and boys by November of that year. In 1886, the church of St. John’s, Darlington, expressed ‘an avowed interest in installing a surpliced choir when resources offer’. St Aidan’s in South Shields, Holy Trinity in Cornforth, and St John the Evangelist in Dipton all stated that their choirs were ‘not surpliced *yet*’ [my emphasis]. Clearly, they sensed this was where the times were moving. This echoes the picture presented by in the national press; by the late nineteenth century, nearly all articles concerning choirs implicitly or explicitly referred to the High Church model.

By combining diocesan choral records with population data from the 1881 census, we can trace also the spread of male surpliced choirs across different environments. The consensus both of choral revival scholarship and of work on the Tractarian movement is that ritualist innovations such as surpliced choirs congregated in towns. To a limited extent, the data confirms this theory. In settlements of up to 10,000 people, the records display a clear correlation between population size and percentage of male choirs (see fig 5). In larger settlements, though, the link disappears. Main towns appear to have developed their own individual choral cultures depending on their wider social, economic, and cultural makeup. At one extreme lay Durham (population 24,237), with five male choirs and no mixed choirs, and Gateshead (population 65,041) with eight male choirs and one mixed choir. Meanwhile, Stockton (population 65,041) was home to two male choirs and four mixed choirs, while Darlington had one male choir and five mixed choirs.

<b>Population size</b>	<b>Male Choirs</b>	<b>Mixed Choirs</b>
<b>0-500</b>	3	14
<b>500-1000</b>	6	10
<b>1000-2000</b>	10	6
<b>2000-5000</b>	28	21
<b>5000-10000</b>	18	11
<b>South Shields (7,710)</b>	4	2
<b>Hartlepool (12,361)</b>	4	0
<b>Sunderland (15,333)</b>	1	0
<b>Durham (24,237)</b>	5	0
<b>Monkwearmouth (26,120)</b>	3	1
<b>Darlington (33,428)</b>	1	5
<b>Jarrow (37,139)</b>	1	1
<b>Stockton (41,719)</b>	2	4
<b>Gateshead (65,041)</b>	8	1
<b>Bishopwearmouth (74,441)</b>	2	0
<b>Total</b>	96 (55.8%)	76 (44.2%)

**Figure 5:** the impact of population size on choir composition in the Durham diocese, based on aggregate records across 1882 and 1886 parish visitation returns.

Yet the most striking observation to emerge from these records is the degree of hybridisation that appears to have occurred between the Tractarian and West Gallery models. Several churches across Durham appear to have possessed both a surpliced choir of men and boys and a contingent of unsurpliced female singers, generally positioned elsewhere in the church. In 1882, St Luke's Church in Ferry Hill had men and boys surpliced in the chancel and 'unsurpliced females sprinkled about church'. St Bartholomew's in Croxdale likewise had a male surpliced choir in the chancel and a group of women at the back. Meanwhile, St Matthew's in Sillworth and St John the Evangelist's in Birtley both placed groups of 'girl' singers in the front rows of the congregation. Relatively few respondents described their choirs in sufficient detail for such nuances to come through: across the two datasets, one can only identify eleven churches following these 'hybrid' arrangements. The real number was probably higher.

Contemporary periodical literature indicates that a similar mix of male and female choristers also developed elsewhere in the country. In 1887, a correspondent to the *Musical Times* reported that female singers took the back rows of the chancel at St. George's Church, Bloomsbury, and were soon to do so at Holy Trinity, Holborn.<sup>45</sup> Two years later, a writer in the *Musical Opinion* noted that he had attended a church in the suburbs of London 'where a few women are placed directly behind the choir stalls of the surpliced choir, where they are *not too obstructively visible*'<sup>46</sup> [original emphasis]. In 1891, it was reported that one Wiltshire rector had plans to place women in the front row of the nave to supplement his chancel choir of men and boys.<sup>47</sup> It should be noticed that these arrangements could all, potentially, be described as 'surpliced', since a surpliced choir was in evidence. Therefore it is possible that some of the 40-55% of 'surpliced' choirs singing in Durham in the 1880s in fact included auxiliary women.

Intriguingly, presentations of hybrid choirs in the media were broadly positive. As one correspondent to *The Quaver* observed:

It is not to be asserted that the re-action [against strictly all-male choirs] is likely to be a retrograde movement; no one in this matter is anxious to turn back; but it may, it is to be hoped prove a movement of development, an advance, indeed, which will end in the fitting employment of all trained voices in the sanctuary.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> M. J. Cope, 'Employment of Female Voices in Church Choirs'. *MT* 28:527 (1887): 49.

<sup>46</sup> Zara, 'Women in Church Choirs', *MO* 13:145 (1889): 32. See a further London example in Cantatrice, 'Employment of Female Voices in Church Choirs', *MT*, 27:526 (1887): 742.

<sup>47</sup> Editor, 'Female Church Choirs'. *MSt* 41:1424 (1891):401, quoting a London correspondent's letter to a provincial paper, titled 'Girls in Church Choirs – A Rector's Difficulty'.

<sup>48</sup> Turpin, 'Female Singers in Church Choirs'. *Q* 92 (1883): 189.



These attempts to incorporate women into the surplined choir signals both its immense success in becoming the standard model for parish choral worship, and the distance it had travelled from original Tractarian ideals. For by the late Victorian period the association between the male surplined choirs and High Anglican theology had been significantly weakened.<sup>49</sup> As Frederic J. Crowest wrote in *Phases of Musical England*, fin-de-siècle Church music operated in a state of ‘glorious confusion’.<sup>50</sup> The surplined choir originated from Tractarian reform, but by the 1880s it was a genre unto itself. And while the late nineteenth century model maintained a core commitment to male singers, its boundaries were clearly not impervious to female participation – even if women found themselves at the back of choir stalls and out of sight.

## Conclusion

Popular history and academic musicology have long played down women’s involvement in Anglican choral music. As observed in the Introduction, narratives of exclusion still dominate our histories of women in sacred music. Yet these stories need revision. For, as this chapter has demonstrated, female singers in fact had a significant presence in Anglican church choirs throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Indeed, by the end of the Victorian period, the Anglican Church housed a diverse range of choral models, all with different gender dynamics. Cathedrals maintained a longstanding – though possibly not unwavering – heritage of surplined male choristers. In the parishes, lingering traditions of West Gallery singing co-existed alongside Tractarian and not-so Tractarian choirs, often but not always male-only. Across this range of sacred genres and contexts, female involvement was, to a greater or lesser degree, never out of the question. Women sang in Anglican music throughout the years 1700-1900.

There remain many blanks to fill in, both during this period and the centuries either side. To what extent did women participate in sacred music before 1700? How far have women truly been excluded from cathedral tradition? And what happened to female church singers after 1900?

Such questions deserve further research, but are unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis. In the chapters that follow, the focus shifts from charting female choristers’ presence to exploring what this presence *meant*. For, while the development of absence narratives during the twentieth century is a further study in itself, it is apparent from

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<sup>49</sup> Rainbow, *Choral Revival*, pp. 263, 281.

<sup>50</sup> F.J. Crowest, *Phases of Musical England* (1881), p. 90.

nineteenth century discussions and controversies that female choristers were not forgotten because they were boring. Rather, woman singers were written out because they proved highly provocative.

In order to understand the anxieties that female church singers could arouse, the following chapters turn to a press controversy that broke out in 1889 regarding women in sacred music: the 'Angelic Quire' debate. The discussion, which erupted in the correspondence section of the *Daily Telegraph* over two weeks in August, reveals a deep-rooted knot of tensions concerning women in choirs. For female choristers were problematic, and the issue was more than simply gender equality. The use of women in choirs had wide-ranging cultural implications, from class politics to the status of church music within British society. The mishmash of perspectives offered in these *Telegraph* letters offers a way into exploring female choristers' status in 1880s Britain. In them, one can find both a new window on late nineteenth century culture, and the beginnings of a deeper understanding of how women came to be written out of sacred musical history over the century that followed.

## Chapter Two

### The ‘Angelic Quire’ Controversy and British Press Culture, c. 1886-1901

This chapter and the chapters that follow explore the meanings of female choristers in late Victorian society through an exploration of the ‘Angelic Quire’ controversy, a discussion over women in choirs that broke out in the *Daily Telegraph*’s correspondence section during August 1889. This debate, during which the *Telegraph* published eighty-nine letters over the course of a single fortnight, offers an unparalleled insight into the status of female choristers during the nineteenth century. As Chapters Three and Four will explore, these insights in turn offer thought-provoking reflections both on late Victorian culture, and on the troubled position that female choristers have occupied in Anglican musical history.

This chapter will lay out the foundations for this analysis by reviewing the context in which this controversy developed. It will map out the discussion’s origins in 1886, its eruption three years later, and its afterlife into the 1890s. It will assess the *Daily Telegraph*’s role in transforming what began as a small disagreement into a nationwide debate. Finally, it will locate the debate within wider sociocultural context, both through a general exploration of the *Telegraph*’s readership and through a focused analysis of ‘Angelic Quire’ letters themselves. Chapters Three and Four deal with *why* the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate erupted; for now, this chapter considers *how*.

### The Beginnings of Debate: Ladies in Surplices

As observed in the previous chapter, women sang in Anglican parish choirs throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet while female choristers were common, they had never been universally accepted. Throughout the period 1860-1889, the propriety of mixed choirs had in fact been subject to regular debate in the British press. Mostly, this had consisted of scattered letters across specialist music periodicals.<sup>1</sup> Yet in 1869 a lengthier debate emerged in the pages of the *Manchester Courier* concerning whether women should sing in church choirs. It was commented upon by several other titles.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example: ‘Lady Choristers’, *MSt* 3:57 (1864): 141-142; ‘“Women’s Rights” in the Choir’, *The Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, 3 Nov 1886; Decani, ‘Church Trebles’, *MSt* 12:289 (1870): 82; ‘The Parson and the Choir’, *The Lancaster Gazette*, 27 April 1872; Turpin, ‘Female Singers in Church Choirs’, *Q* 92 (1883): 189-90.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Correspondence’, *MC* 12-29 Sep 1869; William Glover, ‘Boy Trebles v. Women’, 11:270 (1869): 166; ‘Boys versus Women in Church Choirs’, *The Sphinx* 2:61 (1869): 231.

By the 1880s, then, there already existed low-level tension regarding women in church choirs. Developing this unease into a larger debate required a spark. This came in the form of a movement to dress female choristers in uniform robes.

Clothing may appear a footnote in the history of women in choirs. In fact, however, it was highly significant. For the very idea of a uniformed female chorister was, in the 1880s, a radical statement in favour of female choristers. As observed during the previous chapter, by the late nineteenth century women often sang alongside surpliced men's choirs. However, they generally did so out of sight: at the back of choir stalls, behind screens. Above all, women were made inconspicuous through lack of robes; female choristers wore their own clothes. The symbolic message was unmistakable. Women could sing in church choirs, but should not be visible. Female choristers were admitted, but with a very clear statement of reluctance.

Until 1889, the idea of dressing female choristers in uniform had been ridiculous to the point of being inconceivable. In 1869, *The Sphinx* cast the question of boys versus women as 'Surplice *versus* Gown' ('Gown' here referring to a woman's dress).<sup>3</sup> In the 1882 Durham visitation returns, the vicar of St. Mary's Church, Lanchester, wrote: 'the choir is a mixed and *therefore* unsurpliced one' (my emphasis). The first robed female choristers in England in fact only appeared two years before the 'Angelic Quire' debate, at the parish church of St. Luke's, Birmingham.

Therefore the suggestion of robed female choristers was radical and challenging. Providing female choristers with 'robes' gave them symbolic parity with the surpliced men and boys. It was an unmistakable affirmation that women should participate in Anglican choral music not simply as adjuncts, but as singers in their own right. As such, the developments proved an excellent trigger not simply for a discussion of what women in choirs should wear, but whether women should sing in choirs at all.

Women church singers in uniform first appeared not in England, but in Australia. In the summer of 1886, Rev. Dr. Bromley of St. Paul's pro-cathedral decided not simply to add female singers to his choir, but to dress them in white robes. Bromley called the innovation 'a slight one', arguing that the attire permitted women to 'harmonise well with the surroundings of their position'.<sup>4</sup> The Australian press saw it differently: 'new movement', a 'startling innovation'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'Boys *versus* Women in Church Choirs', *The Sphinx*, 2:61 (1869): 231.

<sup>4</sup> 'Surpliced Ladies'. *The Australian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil*, Nov 1886.

<sup>5</sup> 'Female Choristers'. *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, 19 Aug 1886.



**Figure 6:** 'An Australian Innovation in the Church Service: "The Angelic Choir" at St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral, Melbourne', *The Graphic*, 7 Sep 1889.

Robed female choristers arrived in England the following year. First on the uptake was Rev. Willoughby B. Wilkinson, officiant at St Luke's, Birmingham. In many ways, Birmingham was a surprising setting for choral innovation. As noted in Chapter One, the city was strongly committed to surpliced choirs. As early as 1870, 50% of Birmingham churches had instituted the surpliced model, compared to 21% in greater London.<sup>6</sup> By the 1890s, the city had one of the lowest percentages of female singers in the country: 12.5% compared with 25% nationally. This was a city with a particularly strong attachment to orderly, surpliced, and above all male choirs.

St Luke's was as interesting as its city. At first glance, the parish was not an obvious scene for radical innovation. For one, it was falling to pieces. St. Luke's had only been built in 1842, but due to bad construction the church looked 'ancient enough to have been built in 1642, or even before that'.<sup>7</sup> In 1876, attempts at renovation were launched to counter its 'deplorable state'. However, raising funds proved a challenge; the congregation was not particularly wealthy. By 1889, one wall was still shored up with rotting timbers. The *Birmingham Daily Post* even claimed that 'large pieces of stone' would occasionally fall from the tower, leaving worshippers 'in peril of their lives'. 'St

<sup>6</sup> Temperley, *Parish Church Music*, pp. 278-9.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Rev. W. B. Wilkinson, M.A., at St. Luke's', *Dart*, 18 Nov 1887.

Luke's is not like a town church at all', wrote local paper *The Dart*. 'It is too unpretending, and plain, and unaesthetic for that. It is just like an old-fashioned village church, set down in the midst of the town'.<sup>8</sup> The parish evidently had neither the means nor the congregation to become 'fashionable'. It was not the kind of church to pursue innovation for innovation's sake.

St Luke's real asset was in its Reverend, a 'remarkable man' with great powers of organisation. Willoughby Wilkinson was a driving force in local affairs. He was strongly involved in the temperance movement, having presided over the 1889 National Temperance Congress in Birmingham. He was also an accomplished and committed musician, leading choirs of over one thousand school children to raise support for Temperance work. The *Dart* noted that he did 'the lion's share of everything' at his parish. 'Whether singing in the choir, reading the lessons, or preaching his simple and earnest sermon', the paper wrote, 'Rev. W. B. Wilkinson performs his task with an amount of heartiness and earnestness which are the reverse of the attenuated aesthico-ecclesiasticalism which characterises some modern clergyman [sic]'.<sup>9</sup>

Wilkinson's initiative and enthusiasm were crucial, as introducing 'robed' female choristers was no small feat. In the late nineteenth century, thinking beyond the surpliced men-unsurpliced women dichotomy required a real leap of imagination and creativity. Wilkinson's thinking appears all the more innovative given that he does not appear to have been aware of Bromley's experiments in Melbourne.<sup>10</sup>

Wilkinson also faced a practical challenge: robe design. No precedents for female choir dress existed. Male surplices were out of the question: aside from inappropriate clerical implications, they would not fit over women's bustles.

Wilkinson therefore had to engineer his own alternative, and this in turn created novel problems. Given the state of his church, funds were a problem. The Reverend also had to contend with an overwhelming sense that clothing design was a female domain. The

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<sup>8</sup> 'The Rev. W. B. Wilkinson, M.A., at St. Luke's', *Dart*, 18 Nov 1887; 'Decaying Churches in Birmingham', *BDP*, 5 Nov 1889; 'Architectural, Engineering, and Local Public Works', *British Architect* 6:16 (1876): 251-253.

<sup>9</sup> Traveller, 'An "Angelic Quire": Ladies in Surplices', *DT*, 19 Aug 1889; 'Public Notices', *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, 27 Nov 1891; 'Public Notices', *The Birmingham Gazette*, 16 Oct 1880; 'The National Temperance Congress', *BDP*, 26 Oct 1889; 'The Rev. W. B. Wilkinson, M.A., at St Luke's', *Dart*, 25 Nov 1889.

<sup>10</sup> Willoughby B. Wilkinson, 'Rev. H. R. Haweis's "Angelic Choir"', *MO* 16:181 (1892), 33.

concept of ‘man-millinery’, or ‘millinery and manhood’ was seen as somewhat ridiculous; Wilkinson received taunts for his interest in robe design.<sup>11</sup>

Apparently believing that that he could not surmount these barriers alone, Wilkinson initially contracted an ecclesiastical clothing company to design a pattern. This, however, was found unsatisfactory – or possibly too expensive. The task therefore fell to Wilkinson’s wife, Amy, who drew up her own prototype with the help of a (probably female) friend. The project adhered to a strict budget, with each finished set of women’s robes coming to a modest twenty-four shillings. In most accounts, these two women are presented as Wilkinson’s delegates, whom he employed to make his vision a reality. Of course, it is also very possible that clothing female choristers in robes was the women’s idea in the first place. Possibly, their role in this was later played down to make the change seem less radical.<sup>12</sup>

The Birmingham *Dart*, shortly after Wilkinson’s innovation, claimed that the Reverend was ‘not a very deep or profound man’.<sup>13</sup> Possibly, this was true. Rev. and Mrs. Wilkinson’s actions may have sparked wide-ranging controversy, but on the few occasions when the vicar himself spoke, he did not display much interest in the issues his changes had raised. The most detailed explanation the reverend ever published justifying his innovations was that he ‘was determined to have a surpliced choir’ and ‘did not wish to have boys’.<sup>14</sup> One senses that he, at least, accidentally fell into controversy, rather than actively seeking it.

Controversy nonetheless broke out, though not immediately. Early coverage was in fact rather uninflamatory. *The Birmingham Daily Mail* published a short, uncritical notice in its local news column, beneath a story about a girl who fell into a canal:

SURPLICED LADIES IN A CHURCH CHOIR – An innovation in choirs was introduced yesterday at St. Luke’s Church, Bristol Street. For some time past the choir – a ladies’ and gentleman’s voluntary [sic] – has been situated in the gallery at the west end of the church. The Rev. W. B. Wilkinson, the vicar, feeling the inconvenience of this arrangement, desired to remove it to the chancel. This necessitated the introduction of surplices. The ladies’ surplices are

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<sup>11</sup> See also one slightly degrading description of Wilkinson in the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate: ‘a vicar with a taste for man-millinery’. ‘East Anglian’, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 16 Aug 1889. See also the statement that ‘when we mention music and manhood, too often it produces an impression akin to the mention of millinery and manhood, or dress-making and manhood’. *Music and Manhood*, *MSt* 6:137 (1896): 87. Such an opinion is of course as interesting for its musical implications as for its sartorial ones; these will be explored further in Chapter Four.

<sup>12</sup> Traveller, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 19 Aug 1889. Name of Wilkinson’s wife taken from the 1891 census.

<sup>13</sup> ‘The Rev. W. B. Wilkinson, M.A., at St Luke’s’, *Dart*, 25 Nov 1889.

<sup>14</sup> Willoughby B. Wilkinson, ‘Ladies’ Surpliced Choirs’, *MT* 30:558 (1889): 493.

exceedingly tasteful, consisting of Scotch lawn with pleated backs. Purple velvet caps, similar to those won by D.C.L's, complete the attire.<sup>15</sup>

As the story spread beyond Birmingham, this format saw little change. *The Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* repeated the notice verbatim; *The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* cut it down to two brief sentences.<sup>16</sup> Wilkinson's experiment did attract some comment – the *Dart* called it a 'startling innovation' from a 'bold man'.<sup>17</sup> Mostly, though, the story caused little stir.

### **The *Telegraph* Intervenes**

It in fact took two years for Wilkinson's choir to appear in the national press. Then, in June 1889, a *Musical Times* correspondent reported on St. Luke's robed female choristers.<sup>18</sup> The following month, the periodical published several letters debating the innovation's propriety. This caught the *Daily Telegraph*'s attention. In August, it began the 'Angelic Quire' debate. The controversy began with the publication of a letter referring to 'a clergyman who has tried the plan of mixed lady and gentleman choirs in his church, situated in a large town'. What objectives, the correspondent asked, might there be to robed female choristers?<sup>19</sup>

The *Daily Telegraph* made Wilkinson's innovations famous. By the late 1880s, the *Telegraph* was the most widely read daily paper in the world, with a circulation of 300,000. The paper had been running immensely popular summer correspondence debates for the past decade. These discussions typically inspired a hefty number of contributions. As editor Georges Sala once noted, 'the *Telegraph*'s problem with letters to the Editor is not to maintain their number and importance but the obvious one of selection from a very large post bag.'<sup>20</sup>

The *Daily Telegraph*'s prominence was such that once a question appeared in its pages, it would instantly make the news elsewhere. This was especially the case in 1889, since the previous summer's debate, 'Is Marriage a Failure?', had sparked a particularly strong response – 27,000 letters over several months.<sup>21</sup> One year after this spectacular

<sup>15</sup> 'Local News', *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, 20 Jun 1887.

<sup>16</sup> 'Ecclesiastical, &c.', *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 30 Jun 1887; 'Surpliced Ladies in the Choir', *The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 27 Jun 1887.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Rev. W. B. Wilkinson, M.A., at St. Luke's'. *Dart*, 18 Nov 1887.

<sup>18</sup> 'Facts, Rumours, and Remarks', *MT* 30:555 (1889): 275; 'Ladies' Surpliced Choirs', *MT* 30:557-9 (1889): 429, 492-3, 525-6, 555-6.

<sup>19</sup> Musicus, 'An "Angelic Quire": Ladies in Surplices', *DT* 14 Aug 1889.

<sup>20</sup> Burhman, *Peterborough Court*, p. 148

<sup>21</sup> Burhman, *Peterborough Court*, p. 148



success, commentators speculated ‘which of the *D.T.*’s “gooseberries” is going to win’ this year’.<sup>22</sup>

But the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate won, and won handily. The controversy could not be confined either to the *Telegraph* or to the month of August. Newspapers commented on the debate well into the autumn months.<sup>23</sup> Discussions appeared in specialist music periodicals and in the feminist press. The *Graphic*, an early illustrated periodical, published a full image of Bromley’s surpliced women in Melbourne.<sup>24</sup> ‘Angelic Quire’ puns and sketches appeared in comic journals.<sup>25</sup> The correspondence was reprinted and discussed in local press across the country.<sup>26</sup> The buzz was even sufficient to inspire at least one copy-cat ‘Angelic Quire’, established in Polstead, Colchester, that October.<sup>27</sup>

Interest waned as the year drew to a close. By January 1890, coverage had ceased entirely.

Two years later, however, the controversy was dramatically resurrected. Out of nowhere, Reverend Hugh Reginald Haweis instituted a ‘surpliced’ female at his church of St James’s, Marylebone. Haweis was already a public figure through his prolific journalism and sermon tours, and his engagement with the press could not have been more different from Wilkinson’s. Haweis announced his new choir with a full page article in the *Illustrated London News*, complete with a photo of himself surrounded by his singers. ‘In ten years time’, he declared, ‘I shall beg leave to call attention in these columns to the number of mixed surpliced choirs in England, and to refer the readers

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Today’s Tittle Tattle’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 22 Aug 1889. At this point ‘big gooseberry season’ was a common term for the (news-deprived) months of August and September.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Debate on Mixed v. Boys’ Choirs’, *MH* 9 (1 Sep 1889): 197, 199; Ladies in Surplices’, *MH* 11 (1 Nov 1889): 262; ‘Contemporary Opinion’, *MO* 12:144 (1889): 589-590; F. Gilbert Webb, ‘The Church Choir of the Future’, *MW* 69:34 (1889): 5772; ‘Book Review’, *MSt* 37:1312 (1889): 244; ‘Forthcoming Novelties’, *MT* 30:562 (1889), 717.

<sup>24</sup> ‘The “Angelic Choir” Controversy’, *WPP*, 24 Aug 1889; Mary South, ‘Correspondence’, *WPP*, 31 Aug 1889; ‘Today’s Tittle Tattle’, *PMC*, 24 Aug 1889; ‘Our Illustrations’, *The Graphic* (London, England), 7 Sep 1889.

<sup>25</sup> As a starting point - though this only scratches the surface - ‘Our “Surplice” Population’, *Funny Folks*, 24 Aug 1889; Jeremy Diddler, ‘Correspondence’, *The Sporting Times*, 31 Aug 1889; ‘Angelic(?) Sounds are Pealing’, *Judy*, 4 Sep 1889; ‘The Other Side of the Question’, *Moonshine*, 2 Nov 1889. Noteworthy is the latter’s trenchant observation that ‘the “Angelic Choir” discussion is, after all, only another question of Woman’s Rites’.

<sup>26</sup> Examples of this are again too numerous to list in full; as a starting point see ‘What “Truth” Says’, *Western Times*, 22 Aug 1889; ‘The Dull Season and the Battle of Life’, *Dundee Courier*, 22 August 1889; ‘Ladies in Surplices in Birmingham’, *Litchfield Mercury*, 23 Aug 1889; ‘The Angelic Choir’, *The North-Eastern Daily Gazette*, 27 Aug 1889; ‘The Evening Post’, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 6 Sep 1889.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Colchester and County News’, *The Essex Standard*, *West Suffolk Gazette*, and *Eastern Counties’ Advertiser*, 5 Oct 1889.

of the *Illustrated London News* to this article'.<sup>28</sup> As this rhetoric suggests, Haweis revelled in controversy. In 1891 he had, to some attention, introduced an 'African Choir' of black South Africans.<sup>29</sup>

In the original *Illustrated News* article, Haweis did not reference the 'Angelic Quire' controversy. However, others drew the parallel for him. When Haweis's article was reprinted in the following month's edition of *Musical Opinion*, it was retitled as 'Rev. H. R. Haweis's "Angelic Choir"'.<sup>30</sup> As in 1889, the sight of robed female choristers provoked stir across the press.<sup>31</sup>

This initial rush died down quickly. Nonetheless, Haweis's choir remained active, attracting periodic comment both from specialist musical periodicals and from the press more generally.<sup>32</sup> In 1895 *The Woman's Signal* discussed Haweis's robed female

<sup>28</sup> The Rev. H. R. Haweis, 'The Choir of St. James's, Marylebone', *Illustrated London News*, 20 Aug 1892.

<sup>29</sup> H.R. Haweis, 'The New "Nigger Minstrels": an interview with the African choir', *The Magazine of Music* 8:7 (1891): 135; 'An African Choir', *MH* 1 July 1891.

<sup>30</sup> H. R. Haweis, 'Rev. H. R. Haweis's "Angelic Choir"', *Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review*, 15:180 (1892): 591. The reasons behind this shift in orthography from 'quire' to 'choir' are unclear. The term 'quire' is older, emerging from the Middle English 'quere' by the sixteenth century. 'Choir' came into usage from the seventeenth century, apparently as an assimilation of the Greek-Latin 'chorus', or French 'choeur'. By the nineteenth century, 'choir' dominated. However, the spelling 'quire' was never altered in the Anglican prayer-book. The famous rubric from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer that 'in quires and places where they sing here followeth the anthem' was also frequently quoted by nineteenth century music theologians. The line's enduring visibility is evident in the fact that from May 1895 until July 1906 the *Musical Opinion* published a monthly column that used the quotation as a title, from January 1904 shortening it simply to 'Quires and Places'. See Open Diaspon, 'Quires and Places where they Sing', *MO* 18:212-27:315; 'Quires and Places', *MO* 27:316-29:348 (1904-1906). 'Quire' also remained in infrequent use outside of this context, particularly in literary styles. See lines such as, 'the silenced quire / Lie with their hallelujahs quenched like fire', Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, (1837) Canto XIII. Available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/21700/21700-h/21700-h.htm>> [accessed 12/10/14]. See also 'sing with us, purer, higher / Until you join the Heavenly quire', Lewis Thomas, 'The Child's Quire' [poem], *MW* 54:1 (1876): 23.

Thus the *Telegraph's* decision to title its debate 'an Angelic Quire' was unusual. Possibly, it was intended to give the discussion gravitas, or to distinguish these ensembles from mixed secular 'choirs' (which were only spelt with a 'ch'). Whatever the paper's logic, contemporaries evidently found its reasoning either unclear or unpersuasive. Throughout both body of the *Telegraph* correspondence and later articles the spelling 'Angelic Choir' universally dominates.

When referring to the 1889 *Telegraph* debate as piece of literature, this thesis has honoured the paper's own choice of title, 'Angelic Quire'. However, in reflection both of present-day usage and of contemporary preference, when referring to late nineteenth century groups of singers, the spelling 'choir' has been used. In the same vein, when specifically referring to groups that included robed men and women, the term "'Angelic" choir' is occasionally used.

<sup>31</sup> For example, 'Out and About', *The Woman's Herald*, 16 July 1892; 'People, Places, & Things', *Hearth and Home*, 21 July 1892; 'London Gossip', *Bury and Norwich Post*, and *Suffolk Standard*, 30 Aug 1892; 'Facts and Caprices of the Month', *The Ladies Treasury: a Monthly Magazine*, 1 Sep 1892; 'Ladies versus Boys', *MH*, 536 (1 Nov 1892): 327.

<sup>32</sup> In terms of commentary from musical periodicals, see 'Birmingham Notes', *The Church Musician* 1:6 (1891): 88-9; 'Among the Choirs', *MO* 16:196 (1893): 737; 'Among the Church Choirs', *MO* 17:197 (1894): 298; George T. Fleming, 'The Care of Boys' Voices', *MSt* 48:53

choristers at length in an interview with his wife, Mary Eliza. In 1900, Haweis himself published an article about his choir in *The Temple Magazine*, along with more photographs.<sup>33</sup>

The attention on Haweis also sparked more ‘angelic’ choirs elsewhere. In 1894, *The Magazine of Music* recorded that the innovation had been ‘most favourably received’ at St. Luke’s on Berwick Street, the Church Army, Bradford, and ‘elsewhere’.<sup>34</sup> The same year, a female surpliced choir was also introduced to the church of St. Mary-at-Hill, Monument, though this was quickly disbanded following ‘pressure’ from a number of clergymen.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this interest, however, Haweis’s prediction that boy choristers would disappear within ten years ultimately did not come to pass. When the reverend died in 1901, his cadre of female choristers was disbanded within a matter of months. Following this, the issue of robed female choristers faded from view, not returning to prominence until after the First World War.<sup>36</sup>

### **‘The Rubbing Together of Brains’? The *Daily Telegraph* as social forum**

One could of course conduct a very interesting investigation into any of the events that occurred from 1886 to 1901. This thesis’s principal emphasis on the 1889 *Telegraph* controversy has been chosen for the sake of focus. The *Telegraph* correspondence is a sensible choice of focus for several reasons. By some distance, it is the largest single body of writing on female choristers – robed and non – that emerged over the fifteen years that they were a topic of national discussion. The letters comprise a great variety of voices, but all share the same time period, literary form and polemical focus. And the *Telegraph* correspondence clearly struck a chord; it formed the crucible of 1890s ‘Angelic Quire’ discussions.

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(1895): 7; W.B., ‘Note Book and Pencil’, *MO* 19:221 (1896): 300. More generally, see ‘The Angelic Choir’, *Hearth and Home*, 16 Mar 1893; ‘Editorial Notes’, *The Woman’s Signal*, 17 May 1894; ‘Answers to Correspondents’, *GOP*, 17 Sep 1898.

<sup>33</sup> Frances E. Willard, ‘The Art of Life: an interview with Mrs. M. E. Haweis’, *The Woman’s Signal*, 26 Sep 1895; Hugh Reginald Haweis, ‘Hymns and Hymn Singing’, *The Temple Magazine* 4 (August 1900): 929; Alfred E. Hanscomb, ‘Some Famous Choirs’, *The Temple Magazine* 4 (August 1900): 965.

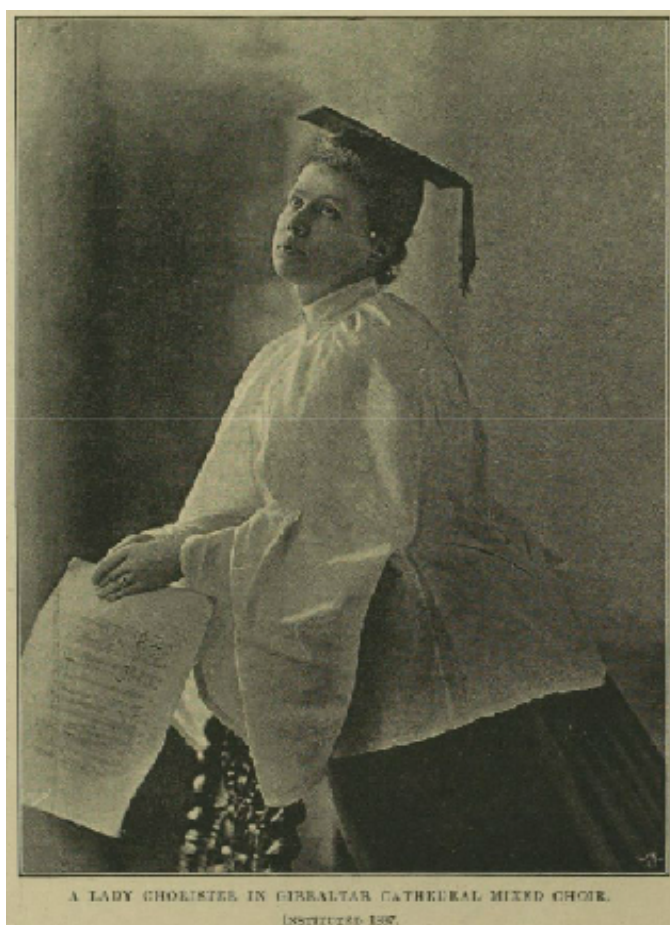
<sup>34</sup> ‘The Rev. H. R. Haweis, M.A.’, *The Magazine of Music*, 11:10 (1894): 220.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Ladies in Surplices’, *Northampton Mercury*, 30 Nov 1894.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Obituary: Hugh Reginald Haweis’, *MT*, 42:697 (1901): 195; ‘Angelic Choirs in Churches’, *MO*, 25:289 (1901): 21. Surpliced female choristers remained a radical ‘innovation’ in Lewes in 1919, though appear to have finally gained some ground by 1929, at least in Colchester. ‘Lady Choristers: A Lewes Innovation’, *The Sussex Agricultural Express*, 10 Oct 1919; ‘Women Choristers’ Dress’, *Colchester Citizen*, 30 Oct 1929.



**Figure 7 (above):** 'The Reverend H. R. Haweis and his Mixed Choir', *ILN* 2783 (Aug 1892): 242.



**Figure 8 (left):** 'A Lady Chorister in Gibraltar Cathedral Mixed Choir', *ILN* 2786 (10 Sep 1892): 338.



The final section of this chapter therefore examines the *Telegraph* debate in more detail. In particular, it considers the *Telegraph*'s impact in shaping the discussion. For while newspaper correspondence – both today, and in the nineteenth century – often presents itself as an open social forum, the reality was more complicated than this. The *Telegraph* took a careful role in shaping its correspondence discussions. Moreover the paper's correspondents tended to represent a somewhat unusual cross-section of British society – though possibly not as unusual as some contemporary critics claimed.

The *Daily Telegraph* was founded in 1855 by army officer and travel writer Arthur Sleigh.<sup>37</sup> From the beginning, it positioned itself as a newspaper for the masses. Exploiting the recent abolition of Stamp Duty, the paper sold for twopence – considerably less than its main competitors.<sup>38</sup> The paper's inaugural editorial announced Sleigh's belief that 'the gradual improvement in the moral and intellectual conduct of the great masses of the people in this country, within the last half-century, may be ascribed to the more general diffusion of knowledge and the extension of education among the lower classes'.<sup>39</sup> The paper consciously sought to continue this process.

Despite its low price, the *Telegraph*'s first edition attracted very little attention, and profit proved elusive. Shortly after the paper's launch, Sleigh was forced to sell to his main investor, *Sunday Times* owner Joseph Moses Levy. Levy further reduced the paper's price to one penny, but insisted that it maintain a focus on quality reporting. The paper therefore acquired the slogan 'the largest, the best, and cheapest newspaper in the world'.<sup>40</sup> As Levy argued in one editorial:

There is no reason why a daily newspaper, conducted with a high tone, should not be produced at a price which will place it within the means of all classes of the community. The extension of the circulation of such a journal must prove beneficial to the public at large. If artisan and Peer alike can peruse daily the same wholesome literary matter, produced by first class writers, the general tone of society must benefit. The working man will feel assured that we consider that he is deserving of having placed before him a newspaper compiled with a care which places it with the Hamlet and secures its perusal in the Palace.<sup>41</sup>

In order to maximise the *Telegraph*'s appeal, Levy resisted taking a strong political stance (with the exception of an early interest in Unionism). The paper was positioned

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<sup>37</sup> Burnham, *Peterborough Court*, p. 1

<sup>38</sup> Martin Conboy, *Journalism: a Critical History* (2004), pp.120-121.

<sup>39</sup> G.A. Cranfield, *The Press and Society: from Caxton to Northcliffe* (1978), pp.?

<sup>40</sup> Burnham, *Peterborough Court*, p. 5

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p.6.

as ‘independent in its strictures, loyal and constitutional in its sentiments’, and generally paid only passing interest to high politics and Parliamentary affairs.<sup>42</sup> Instead, Levy’s primary focus fell on topics that would interest the ‘general’ population: fashion, crime, social issues. ‘The “Telegraph” indeed is not a great newspaper in the strict sense of the word’, noted contemporary journalist H.W. Massingham. ‘It very often contains very little of what the newspaper man is accustomed to regard as news. It prefers a few salient excerpts from the book of daily life to a regular and painstaking transcription of the whole volume’.<sup>43</sup>

Inevitably, Levy was criticised for this ‘dumbed down’ approach. Reproaches were as much driven by class snobbery as by the actual content of the *Telegraph*’s articles. George Augustus Sala, who eventually became editor, was keenly aware of concerns that the paper was ‘the prelude of sedition and revolution’.<sup>44</sup> Very soon, though, the *Telegraph*’s marketing strategy proved extraordinarily successful. Within three months, the paper’s circulation exceeded that of any other morning paper except the *Times*.<sup>45</sup> By 1860, the figures sat at 142,000; by 1888, 300,000.<sup>46</sup> This audience was notably London-centric. As Massingham commented in 1892:

[The *Telegraph* is] ‘pre-eminently the “cockney” newspaper. For many a long year it has interpreted more steadily and more consistently than any other journal the average thinking and believing of one or two great layers of London life....the distinguishing feature of the “Telegraph” has been its appeal to the everyday life of the clerk, the shopkeeper, and also to the great mass of villadom which extends in concentric rings east, west, north, and south of poor and working London. Owing to this fact its circulation has a universality which still makes it a favourite companion in first, second, and third class railway carriages. Its great advertising connection assists it with all these classes.’<sup>47</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the *Telegraph* pioneered long-running correspondence debates during the 1880s. Of course, letters to the editor were hardly a new concept in British journalism. The main London dailies had welcomed correspondence for decades. But until the *Telegraph*, letters made up a comparatively very small part of papers, and were scattered among other sections alone or in pairs - hardly a feature.<sup>48</sup> The *Telegraph* changed the game. By 1889, it frequently initiated long series of

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Mitchell (ed.), *The Newspaper Press Directory and Advertiser’s Guide* (1856).

<sup>43</sup> H.W. Massingham, ‘The Great London Dailies’, *The Leisure Hour* (1892): 456.

<sup>44</sup> John M. Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy? The Daily Telegraph on a Victorian Dilemma* (1995), p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> Cranfield, *Press and Society*, p. 207.

<sup>46</sup> Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (1985), p. 52.

<sup>47</sup> H.W. Massingham, ‘The Great London Dailies’, *The Leisure Hour* (May 1892): 455.

<sup>48</sup> Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy?*, p.34.

correspondence debates, accorded their own section in the paper. During the summer ‘silly season’, when politics and high society dried up, these letters formed the paper’s primary interest.<sup>49</sup>

Historian John Robson has cast this innovation as a new participatory style of journalism: ‘moving authority from leaders to readers’.<sup>50</sup> Sala certainly indulged in this democratising rhetoric. The section, he argued, was a forum for ‘views differing from or contrary to those of the paper itself’ – something that ‘must be in the public interest’.<sup>51</sup> Massingham concurred:

A special feature of the ‘Telegraph’ has always been the curious facility with which it has struck some note of popular interest, and prevailed upon readers to discuss it by the way of letters. It has thus become a kind of forum for the middle-class man, the arch-ventilator of the grievances of the middle-class household...It would be easy to laugh at these outpourings of conventional woes, but after all it is no slight boon to furnish a rough outlet for the fever and fret which make up two-thirds of the life of the average British household. The controversy on marriage had at least the benefit of laying bare the genuine troubles of the most vital of all human institutions, just as the letters on the drink question threw a vivid search light on the deep-seated cancerous growth of our time.<sup>52</sup>

But elsewhere in the press, the *Telegraph*’s correspondence features were often the butt of jokes. The general tenor can be seen in one rather cynical critique published by comic paper *Judy*, the winter after the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate:

The Hookah, Bloomsbury, October 9<sup>th</sup> 1889

Dear Judy – What is your opinion of those ladies and gentlemen who write “to the Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*” on social subjects introduced by the paper? Don’t you think they are very clever – at times? And don’t you think they teach us a great deal of – of – of something of which before we wot not of? And don’t you think they afford us a fine opportunity for the rubbing together of brains – sometimes? *I* do – sometimes. And they do, at least, result in something of a Gilbertian humour. For instance, some correspondents have written to the editor that it is very foolish to write to him or to the paper – in such a strait. It is, *very* – of *that* – in such a strain.

I know you approve of letters to the Editor because you invite us to write you which I’ve done – with pleasure.

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<sup>49</sup> Burnham, *Peterborough Court*, p.146.

<sup>50</sup> Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy?*, p, 260.

<sup>51</sup> Burhman, *Peterborough Court*, p. 149.

<sup>52</sup> Massingham, ‘The Great London Dailies’, 456.

With kindest regards, dear JUDY, and best wishes for the Conservatives, whom you honour and regard,

Believe me ever yours,

Gloria Granville<sup>53</sup>

Besides general jibes that *Telegraph* correspondents were naive, self important, and illiterate, upmarket papers levelled more serious criticisms. *The Saturday Review*, a 'caustic' periodical aimed at the intellectual upper middle classes, criticised the quality of theological discussion in the *Telegraph* and similar titles:

Theology has for some time reigned in the papers. The correspondence columns have been crowded with ecclesiastical disputants – all eager, many violent, most ill-informed...It must be obvious that the newspaper as an organ of religious discussion is open to serious objection. The sacred character of the subjects at issue disqualifies them for the rough treatment and wide publicity of columns which normally match the tastes, and echo the thoughts, of busy men of the world, who know little and care less about theological concerns, whose interest in them, therefore, signifies neither natural aptitude nor adequate knowledge for such discussions, but an abnormal excitement bringing into play the latent prejudices and passions commonly quiescent.<sup>54</sup>

The 'Angelic Quire' debate received many similar criticisms. The correspondence was decried as 'remarkable chiefly for its inanity'; an 'unmitigated nuisance'; 'rapidly passing into drivell'<sup>55</sup> Others commentators considered the debate little more than an oddity to pass the summer months - 'just the thing for silly season'.<sup>56</sup>

These remarks might provoke doubts over the 'Angelic Quire's usefulness as a historical source. Obviously the source has limitations. These letters may indeed not be the best place to find perspectives on, for instance, Victorian theology. But the 'Angelic Quire' debate was appreciated as well as lambasted. Many used the correspondence as a starting point for serious discussion. While 'the burning questions of a "gooseberry season" are soon forgotten by the public', wrote *The Musical Herald*, 'musicians cannot

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<sup>53</sup> 'Judy's Letter Box', *Judy*, 16 October 1889 For similar critiques, see 'The Drink Controversy', *The Speaker: the liberal review*, 19 Sep 1891; 'Some Absurd Correspondence', *MSt* 6:136 (1896): 68; 'Unpublished Letters', *Judy*, 24 Feb 1897.

<sup>54</sup> 'Theology in the Newspapers', *SR*, 28 Jan 1899. See also, 'Theology of the Daily Press', *SR*, 27 Jan 1877.

<sup>55</sup> 'Angelic(?) Sounds are Pealing', *Judy*, 4 Sep 1889; Nathaniel Gubbins, 'My Note Book', *The Sporting Times*, 14 Sep 1889; 'From Our London Correspondent', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 22 Aug 1889.

<sup>56</sup> 'Our "Surplice" Population', *Funny Folks*, 24 Aug 1889; 'What "Truth" says', *Western Times*, 22 August 1889, p.4; 'The Dull Season and the Battle of Life', *Dundee Courier*, 22 August 1889, p. 2.



fail to be interested in the present case'.<sup>57</sup> The *Woman's Penny Paper* agreed: 'The "Angelic Choir" controversy is something more than a big gooseberry for the dead season. It raises the whole question of woman's right to take her share in leading what should be one of the noblest forms of public worship.'<sup>58</sup>

### **The Correspondence Itself**

Looking at the 'Angelic Quire' correspondence itself, it is evident that while some *Telegraph* correspondent stereotypes were fair, others were very misleading. Among the more accurate of these assertions was that *Telegraph* readers were 'cockney'.<sup>59</sup> Of the eighty-nine letters published, sixty had an address from London or Greater London. Of the remaining twenty-nine, twelve came from southeastern towns such as Folkestone, Brighton, Southampton and Worthing. Eleven came from the rest of Britain, with no obvious geographical spread. The solitary remaining letter was sent by an expatriate living in Florence. The predominance of southeastern correspondents was significant. For as we observed in the previous chapter, *Yearbook* data indicates that this region displayed a disproportionately strong preference for male choristers. This is worth bearing in mind during our analysis.

Other *Telegraph* stereotypes were less well founded. Notably, claims that correspondents were universally members of the lower classes were not true of the 'Angelic Quire' debate. If one cross-references the street names of London correspondents (where offered) with data supplied in Charles Booth's 1889 *Map of Poverty*, it is clear that writers were generally well off.<sup>60</sup> Most correspondence came from solidly middle-class areas: Strand, Maida-Hill, New Cross, Oxford Street. Some addresses, such as West Kensington, Piccadilly, and Albermarle Street, bordered on upper class areas. Only three addresses can be identified as socially 'mixed' areas (to use Booth's terminology): Westferry Road in Millwall, Westminster, and Bermondsey.

Judging from the content of these letters, it is clear that writers were not only affluent, but well-informed. Fifty-five of the eighty-nine correspondents clearly stated that they were professionally connected to choral music, as cleric, as singer, or as choirmaster. Many, by their own account, had spent substantial time in the field. Several signed their letters with professional titles. Among these were important and influential figures: Edward Griffith, Honourable Secretary of the Church Music Reform Association; R.

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<sup>57</sup> 'Debate on Mixed v. Boys' Choirs', *The Musical Herald* 9 (1 Sep 1889): 199.

<sup>58</sup> 'The "Angelic Choir" Controversy', *WPP*, 24 August 1889.

<sup>59</sup> Notably this term did not carry the sociocultural baggage it does today, meaning simply 'somebody from London'.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Booth, *Descriptive Map of London Poverty* (1889), available online at <<http://www.umich.edu/~risotto/home.html>> [accessed 27/09/14].

Graham Harvey, pianist to his Majesty the King of the Hellenes; and what is probably a young Arthur Edwards, organist and composer. Of course, there were exceptions to these rules. One correspondent, 'F.C. Ashbolt', notably identified himself as 'a working lad'. Yet despite the opening letter's claim that church music 'is a subject on which everybody who goes to a place of worship has a right to speak', the 'Angelic Quire' discussion was first and foremost a forum for music professionals.

Despite – or perhaps because of – this, the *Saturday Review*'s accusation that *Telegraph* correspondents did not understand theology has some basis. A few correspondents engaged with Bible and historical precedent. Notably, J.S. Wesley and C.R.M both argued over the extent to which St Paul's injunction that 'it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church' referred to choral singing. However, references to the Bible and to Christian tradition proved rare. For several correspondents, this lack was sad but not surprising. According to John Place,

Were it not that this is a very Antinomian age, one might be surprised at any defence being set up for women singers in church after the express injunction from St. Paul for them to be silent there...arguments in favour of female singers [ought] not to weigh as dust in the balance against St. Paul and the Church.

Meanwhile, 'A Kensington Churchman' complained that 'many have written on the musical side of this question, but none as yet have treated of it in its ritual aspect'. 'It must not be forgotten', he argued, 'that the latter is almost as important as the former'.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, other writers welcomed the absence of Biblical and theological precedent from this discussion. According to 'A Member of the Male Sex',

To adduce as an argument a precept written in bygone ages – when women were contemned and despised as beings of an inferior order...and to compare them with the highly-educated and intelligent women of the present day, is simply absurd'.<sup>62</sup>

Arthur Edwards took a similar perspective:

We have not, I submit, to consider what was said on this or that subject by holy men of past ages, living under circumstances and in times wholly different from our own. With the times we must move, and the fittest will survive, and this is as true with respect to church choirs as anything else.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> A Kensington Churchman, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 27 Aug 1889.

<sup>62</sup> A Member of the Male Sex, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 27 Aug 1889.

<sup>63</sup> Arthur Edwards, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 15 Aug. See also F.N.A., 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 24 Aug 1889.

Overwhelmingly, writers invoked their own 'experience' rather than turning to Biblical or historical precedent ('experience' was always the term). For many, the 'experience' was professional. Opening with a statement of the how long the author had worked in the field became something of a cliché:

SIR - I have had about twenty five years' experience as a chorister in cathedral, parish church, and choral society choirs...<sup>64</sup>

SIR - As an organist and teacher of music having an experience of twenty-three years, I beg to add my quota....<sup>65</sup>

SIR – As an organist of thirty-five years' standing, and before that period a chorister at Westminster Abbey, I have had a large experience...<sup>66</sup>

Where correspondents did not have professional experience, personal experience and impressions formed the basis of their authority. Several made bald generalisations, feeling no need to establish authority beyond their own personal impressions. One particularly blatant example came in a letter by 'Major-General':

SIR – it seems to me (who know nothing about the subject beyond what the evidence of my eyes and ears teaches me) that there is no comparison, as regards the pleasure to be derived by the congregation, between the sweet voices and decorous behaviour of women...[and]...the harsh unmusical tones and irreverant manner of boy-choristers.<sup>67</sup>

But while there is a sense of ill-information in a few letters, correspondents overwhelmingly presented professional experience, albeit rarely combined with those other sources of authority - Biblical, historical - that still held sway elsewhere in Victorian society.

In short, 'Angelic Quire' correspondents were generally middle class London professionals. They were usually uninterested in traditional Biblical and historical precedents, instead applying to their own experience. The ideas they put forward reflect these origins and determine the focus of this thesis. There is doubtless a fascinating study to be written on Victorian attitudes towards female choristers among those not directly involved in church music. Regrettably, this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

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<sup>64</sup> Arthur Edwards, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 15 Aug 1889.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Mills, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 24 Aug 1889.

<sup>66</sup> John Rhodes, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 16 Aug 1889.

<sup>67</sup> Major-General, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 24 Aug 1889.

## Conclusion

This chapter has offered a broad sweep of the context necessary to understanding the ‘Angelic Quire’ controversy. It has offered an overview of the 1889 discussion’s concerns, arguing that while the debate was sparked by the detail of dress, it ultimately concerned whether women should sing in choirs at all. It has explored how development in female choristers’ attire from 1886 prompted the development of this wide-ranging debate three years later. It has charted the eruption of ‘Angelic Quire’ debates over the summers of 1889 and 1892, its lingering presence through the 1890s, and its eventual demise. Finally, it has explored the origins of the 1889 *Telegraph* correspondence – both journalistic and social.

Having explored *how* the ‘Angelic Quire’ controversy emerged, the following chapters ask *why*. Through a close reading of the *Telegraph* debate, Chapters Three and Four examine the issues that drove this controversy – from the obvious (gender), to the considerably less so. For while this debate was, to a degree, the *Telegraph*’s creation, *Telegraph* editors chose the topic of female choristers for a reason. Female choristers - in robes, and in general - pressed on a complex web of tensions within late Victorian culture. The ensuing discussion offers a remarkable insight both into late nineteenth century Britain, and into longstanding ambivalence towards women in sacred music more generally.

## Chapter Three

### **‘A Heavenly Voice’: Angels and the Female Body, c. 1889**

Debates over womanhood lay at the heart of the ‘Angelic Quire’ controversy. Throughout the correspondence, the question of what constituted appropriate female behaviour dominated. At times the concern was explicit, at others oblique - evident in descriptions of women’s voices, or their appearance. Always, however, it was present.

Yet this was not a mere case of feminists and reactionaries. Supporters of female choristers pushed the boundaries of acceptable womanhood, but they were rarely as radical as one might first suppose. Exploring their arguments offers a revealing insight into late Victorian gender politics.

A useful way of understanding the debate’s emphasis can in fact be found in its title. The standout word in ‘An Angelic Quire: Ladies in Surplices’ is the last: ‘surplices’. The idea of women in ‘surplices’ was *the* remarkable idea here. In 1889, the surplice was not simply a male but a clerical garment. It implied religious authority. The idea of a woman wearing one would have been astonishing, almost ridiculous. Early moves towards female ordination were still thirty years away.<sup>1</sup> ‘Surplice’ was a word with shock value.

Yet the debate itself was not as radical as its title. Even the staunchest champions of female choristers did not seek to claim female religious authority for women. Those in favour of uniform indeed went to great pains to show that they did *not* want ‘surplices’: their proposals were ‘robes’, ‘attire’, ‘costume’. ‘Ladies in Surplices’ was shocking: an excellent strapline. But like many straplines, it was not accurate. Nobody in this correspondence actually *advocated* surpliced women.

The nub of the argument can in fact be found in a different word: ‘angelic’. By 1889, ‘Angelic’ was a defining metaphor of middle-class femininity. We all know the Victorian ‘angel in the house’, that beacon of domestic virtue whom Virginia Woolf tried to kill in 1931.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite its dominance, ‘angelic’ imagery was constantly under revision – and particularly so during the 1880s. Could ‘angelic’ women sing in church choirs? Supporters argued yes. In doing so, they did not seek to alter the standard paradigm of Victorian womanhood. Rather, they contested the range of activities that fell within it.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ministry of Women: a Report by a Committee Appointed by His Grace the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury* (1919).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.” Virginia Woolf, ‘Professions for Women’ (Paper read to the Women’s Service League, 1931), in Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (1947).

This chapter explores the attempts by supporters of female choristers to position women singers within hegemonic ideas of femininity. In particular, it argues that the ‘robes’ put forward by Wilkinson and others were intended not as ‘surplices’, but as part of a larger project to emphasise female singers’ ‘angelic’ purity. That it was so easy to present the suggestions as clerical attire was an unfortunate result of ambiguous sartorial metaphors: most obviously, the colour white.

To understand how robed female choristers were perceived, we first need to explore the metaphor ‘angelic’. For while it is common knowledge that ‘angels’ were central to Victorian culture, it is less often recognised that the term ‘angel’ carried a complicated, at times contradictory wealth of associations. Understanding these multiple meanings is crucial to appreciating the full subtleties of the ‘Angelic Quire’ correspondence.

### Victorian ‘Angels’

Originally, angels had little to do either with women or with houses. In scripture and early Christian representations, they were beings rather than metaphors: messengers of God, multiform and ethereal.<sup>3</sup> As Nina Auerbach notes in *Woman and the Demon*, these cut a very different figure to the Victorian ladies they would later describe. Original angels were ‘martial, armoured figures...distinguished by their dazzling mobility’.<sup>4</sup>

*Woman and the Demon* reads these figures as male, noting Milton in *Paradise Lost*: ‘Down thither prone in flight / He speeds’.<sup>5</sup> Yet early angels were frequently described as sexless. The seventh century *Ambigua* of Maximus the Confessor asserts that angels occupied a state of ‘divine virtue’ above gender distinctions.<sup>6</sup> Several centuries later, angels of the Italian Renaissance were presented as ethereal, nongendered beings. Notable examples include the angels in Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* and in Masolino de Panicale’s *The Baptism of Christ*.<sup>7</sup> Milton himself later highlighted angels’ bodily ambiguity: ‘for Spirits when they please / Can either Sex assume, or both’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Glenn Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (2001), pp. 1-12.

<sup>4</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: the Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982), p.70.

<sup>5</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, cited in Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Mayr-Harting, *Perceptions of Angels in History* (1998); see also Doru Costache, ‘Living above Gender: insights from Saint Maximus the Confessor’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21:2 (2013): 261-290.

<sup>7</sup> Rosa Giorgi, *Angels and Demons in Art* (2005), pp. 289-293; James R. Lewis and Evelyn Dorothy Oliver, *Angels A to Z* (2008), p. 52. For further detail on angels in Western tradition to c. 1900, see David Albert Jones, *Angels: a History* (2010); Erika Langmuir, *A Closer Look: Angels* (National Gallery London) (2010); George J. Marshall, *Angels: an Indexed and Partially Annotated Bibliography of Over 4300 Scholarly Books and Articles Since the 7th Century B.C.* (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, cited in Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, p. 71.

The metaphorical 'angel', describing a person rather than a celestial being, first emerged around the Reformation. As today, the qualities it implied were only tangentially allied to angels' scriptural functions. Instead, the term denoted a sense of virtuousness, kindness, or beauty. Shakespeare's Romeo calls to Juliet:

O, speak again, bright angel, for thou art  
As glorious to this night, being o'er my head  
As is a winged messenger of heaven<sup>9</sup>

By the eighteenth century, 'angelic' people were commonplace. Yet the term's femininity was not yet cemented. Frances Burney's *Evelina* is called 'innocent as an angel', 'handsome as an angel', but *Pamela*'s Mr. B is likewise describe as 'an angel of a master'.<sup>10</sup> When Mr. Wickham elopes with Lydia Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, 'all Meryton seemed striving to blacken the man who, but three months before, had been almost an angel of light'.<sup>11</sup> It was only by the nineteenth century that 'angelic' became a predominantly feminine term.<sup>12</sup>

The development occurred as part of a wider shift in sexual cultures. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women had been viewed as corrupting influences, still bearing the taint of Original Sin.<sup>13</sup> Yet towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, a new discourse emerged out of Evangelical religion that positioned women as spiritual and moral guardians. By the middle of the nineteenth century, women had become beacons of virtue. Anna Jameson, summarising Sarah Stickney Ellis's addresses to *Women, Wives, Mothers and Daughters of England* in 1843, noted that woman was

the refiner and the comforter of man; it is hers to keep alive all those purer, gentler, and more genial sympathies, those refinements in morals, in sentiment, in manners, without which we men, in this rough working-day world, would degenerate.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* II.i.68 (1597)

<sup>10</sup> Frances Burney, *Evelina* (1778), letters V, XLVI. Available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6053/pg6053.html>> [accessed 29/09/14]; Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), letters VI, X. Available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6124/6124-h/6124-h.htm>> [accessed 29/09/14].

<sup>11</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), chapters 4, 48. See also Lydia's description of Wickham in chapter 47: 'there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel'.

<sup>12</sup> Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Doris May Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (1977), pp. 204-6.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen Jordan, *Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain* (2002), p. 51.

These ideas were echoed six years later in a clergyman's letter to the *Westminster Review*:

The true woman speaks to every true man who sees her, refining and exalting his intellect and feeling, making him indeed know his true manhood to consist in the noble action of his soul.<sup>15</sup>

In keeping with this new exalted spirituality, 'angelic' became a predominantly feminine term - and pervasive in descriptions of women. Most famous is Coventry Patmore's 1862 poem 'The Angel in the House'.<sup>16</sup> However, many other examples abound throughout Victorian discourse. Agnes, with her 'calm, good, self-denying influence', is David Copperfield's 'better angel'.<sup>17</sup> Florence Nightingale was famously described as a 'ministering angel' by the *Times* in 1854.<sup>18</sup> Five years later, author Timothy Shay Arthur wrote that woman was 'a good angel', leading man 'safely on his way through this world and upward to the world of eternal felicity...if she be loving, true, and unselfish, she will be the angel of his home'.<sup>19</sup>

Yet despite this proliferation of the 'angel in the house', older Biblical 'angels' still maintained a presence. Gayle Shadduck has shown that five major poems concerning sexual union between angels and 'daughters of men' were published over the period 1813-1823.<sup>20</sup> By midcentury, Biblical angelology continued to receive interest from the press.<sup>21</sup> And, significantly, more than one writer in the 'Angelic Quire' correspondence noted that Holy Scripture 'never speaks of a feminine angel, but always speaks of an angel in the masculine gender'.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore by 1889, the term 'angel' possessed a dual meaning. On one hand was the 'Angel in the House' - human, feminine, and domestic. On the other, traditional 'celestial' angels remained prominent - inhuman, sexless, mobile. To further the confusion, *both* were considered musical. Celestial angels had been depicted singing

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 52

<sup>16</sup> Coventry Patmore, 'The Angel in the House' (1854-62), available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4099/4099-h/4099-h.htm>> [accessed 11/11/14], canto 4:2.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1850), available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/766/766-h/766-h.htm>> [accessed 11/11/14], chs. 18, 25

<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 20 Nov 1854. Cited in E.T. Cook, *The Life of Florence Nightingale*, vol. 1 (1913), p. 237. Available online at <<https://archive.org/details/lifeofflorenceni01cookuoft>> [accessed 11/11/14]

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Shay Arthur, *What Can Woman Do?* (1859), pp. 109-110.

<sup>20</sup> Gayle Shadduck, *England's Amorous Angels, 1813-1823* (1990).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, reviews of 'A Country Pastor', *Lectures on the Scriptural Revelations Respecting Good and Evil Angels* (1851), in *The English Review* 15:29 (1851): 212; *The Literary Gazette* 1779 (22 Feb 1851): 148. Also 'Godet on the Angels', *London Quarterly Review* 39:78 (1873): 461-466.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Husband, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* Aug 15th; Rupert St. Leger, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* Aug 27th.



since the twelfth century: Dante's *Divine Comedy* reports them 'singing Hosanna, choir on choir'.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the 'Angel in the House' was expected to perform music. Henry Mackenzie's Julia looks 'like an angel' as 'she sat at the organ, her fingers pressing on the keys'. Jane Fairfax, a 'complete angel', is lauded for her talent as a pianist.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile Hugh Reginald Haweis – the same Haweis who established his own 'angelic choir' in 1892 – spoke of a young lady 'who sings like an angel' in his prescriptive work *Ideas for Girls*.<sup>25</sup> As the following section will demonstrate, supporters of female choristers invoked *both* varieties of angelic musicality in their justifications for women's voices. It is in fact entirely plausible that the term 'angelic quire' was conceived as a pun – 'angels' being associated with women, 'quires' with spirits. Such verbal trickery seems typical of the 1880s *Telegraph*.

### **'Clear and Sweet from the Throat': Woman as Divine Channel**

Associations between female voices and celestial angels – in the older, Biblical sense – were well established since the early nineteenth century. The links' origins stretch back further, to the days of castrati.

Michel Poizat has observed that castrati first emerged in the Catholic Church over the ninth and tenth centuries as a means of approximating celestial choirs. There existed a general consensus that these voices could, as Christian Gaumy puts it, 'be nothing other than high-pitched'.<sup>26</sup> During the early modern period, castrati were embraced by opera, where their divine associations made them suitable for even the most masculine of male roles. Therefore in, for example, Handel's *Rinaldo*, Christian warriors Rinaldo and Eustazio were originally voiced by alto castrati as a mark of their God-sanctioned crusading mission.<sup>27</sup> Thus was cemented an association between high-pitched voices and disembodied divinity.

The castrato's sexual indeterminacy clearly made his voice an ideal vehicle for the divine. However, the voices of boy trebles were also described as 'angelic'. So, too, were

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<sup>23</sup> Dante, *Divine Comedy*, 'Paradise', XXVIII. 1814 translation by Rev. H. F. Cary, M.A. Available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8800/8800-h/8800-h.htm>> [accessed 29/09/14]. See also Erika Langmuir, *Angels* (1999) for a series of artistic representations, in particular pp.14-17, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Mackenzie, *Julia de Roubigné* (1777), cited in Regula Hohl Trillini, *The Gaze of the Listener: English Representations of Domestic Music-making* (Rodopi, 2008), p, 51; Jane Austen, *Emma*, Chapter XVIII.

<sup>25</sup> Rev. H.R. Haweis, *Ideas for Girls* (1897), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Christian Gaumy, speaking at the October 1978 France-Culture conference, cited in Michel Poizat, *L'Opéra ou le Cri de l'Ange: Essai sur la Jouissance de l'Amateur d'Opéra* (1986; 2001 edition), p. 162, Translations from Poizat are my own.

<sup>27</sup> Winton Dean and J. Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas: 1704-1726* (1995), p. 181.

female sopranos. In 1639, John Milton wrote three Latin sonnets in honour of celebrated singer Leonora Baroni:

The music in your voice bespeaks the presence of God...[either God or the Holy Spirit] is moving mysteriously in your throat...teaching mortal hearts how they might become accustomed to immortal tones. If God is all things and permeates all things, in you alone He speaks and possesses all his other Creatures in silence.<sup>28</sup>

Castrati were widely acknowledged to be the ‘most divine’ of these three voice types. Yet despite their popularity, over the eighteenth century castration fell into decline – not least for humanitarian reasons. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the castrati’s privileged position in opera was by a dual Romantic hierarchy, which positioned tenor and soprano as dual principal singers within a piece.

Castrati may have declined, but the association between high voices and the divine was sufficiently embedded in European musical culture that it survived their demise. ‘Angelic’ metaphors simply transferred from high-pitched male voices to the nearest equivalent: the female soprano. In this sense, Poizat argues that ‘romanticism effectively established Woman as the last avatar of the angel’.<sup>29</sup> Thus developed such ‘angelic’ female roles as Elsa (*Lohengrin*), Léonore (*Fidelio*), and Violette (*La Traviata*).

Representations of female voices as celestial channels were common in literary and musical circles during the early nineteenth century. George Sand’s *Consuelo*, from the novel of the same name, is a ‘heavenly singer’: ‘She is poetry music and faith personified!’<sup>30</sup> Similar language suffused descriptions of female singers in the press. In 1847, *The Liverpool Journal* rhapsodised about the ‘freshness and purity’ of soprano Jenny Lind’s voice, likening it to ‘unearthly music in its beauty’.<sup>31</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* wrote that Lind sang with an ‘almost radiant clearness’, a ‘pure stream of melody’ that seemed to ‘float in the air with an independent existence.’<sup>32</sup> Significantly, the term ‘diva’ emerged during this period, appearing in Italian poetry from the 1820’s

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<sup>28</sup> Cited in Paula Gillett, *Musical Women in England, 1870-1914: ‘Encroaching on all Man’s Privileges’* (2000), p. 142. Earlier examples of divine female voices can be found in Elena Laura Calogero, ‘“Sweet Alluring Harmony”: Heavenly and Earthly Sirens in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Literary and Visual Culture’, in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (2006), pp. 140-176.

<sup>29</sup> Poizat, *L’Opéra*, p. 187.

<sup>30</sup> George Sand, *Consuelo*, (1842-1843), available online at <<https://archive.org/details/consuelo00sandgoog>>, p. 88 [accessed 11/11/14].

<sup>31</sup> ‘*The Liverpool Journal*, 11 Sep 1847, reprinted in ‘Jenny Lind! Jenny Lind!! Jenny Lind!!!’, *MW* 22:38 (1847): 601-602.

<sup>32</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 Sep 1847, reprinted in ‘Jenny Lind! Jenny Lind!! Jenny Lind!!!’, *MW* 22:36 (1847): 571.

and in English-language sources from 1840. Despite later associations with self-importance and petulance, the term originally derived from the Latin *dīvus*, meaning ‘divine’, ‘god’, ‘deity’. In early usage it further emphasised the goddess-like quality of female singers. Notably, there was no male equivalent.<sup>33</sup>

This Romantic vision of female voices as divine channels continued later in the century. In Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s 1886 novel *The Future Eve*, Hadaly sings with a voice ‘coming straight from Nature and recalling the forests, the skies, and the immensity of space’. ‘You see,’ exclaims the protagonist, ‘*she is an angel!*...if indeed it’s true, as the theologians teach us, *that angels are simply fire and light*’.<sup>34</sup> Equally striking is Greta Gilmour’s story ‘Her Last Oratorio’, published in the *Girl’s Own Paper* in 1898. Gilmour tells the story of a young soprano, Jenny, as she gives a concert of sacred music. In the process, she becomes medium for the sublime, her singing a transcendent experience:

When the young soprano rose again there was a wonderful light on her face. It was as a high priestess of the Most High that she took the sacred words on her lips. “Come unto Him, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and He will give you rest”. And the people with one accord, came - yielding to the pleading of that angelic voice, which seemed in very truth to proceed from Heaven.<sup>35</sup>

In true Romantic tradition, Jenny’s transcendence is marked with sacrifice. Like the best Romantic sopranos, her recital ends when she - literally - drops dead. ‘A terrible hush fell on the assembly’, concludes Gilmour, ‘as the prostrate form of the young singer was carried from the chancel’.

As one might expect, during the ‘Angelic Quire’ controversy supporters of female choristers seized on ‘angelic’ language to make the case for women in church choirs. One of the most striking examples, which it is worth spending some time discussing, comes from a self-described ‘Octogenerian’ [sic] (who presumably had been a teenager during the heyday of literary Romanticism).

In support of female singers, ‘Octogenerian’ recounts an unpublished ballad by poet Sir Francis Doyle concerning Dorothea Jordan, a prominent actress during the Regency period. Walking through the streets of London one evening, Jordan came upon a woman singing feebly, in dire need of charity. Switching clothes with the woman, Jordan busked on her behalf. ‘In a few moments’, the ‘Octogenerian’ writes, ‘the silence

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<sup>33</sup> Rachel Cowgill and Hillary Poriss, *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2012), p. xxxiii

<sup>34</sup> Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, *The Future Eve* (1886), cited in Frank, *Mechanical Song*, p. 183.

<sup>35</sup> Greta Gilmour, ‘Her Last Oratorio’, *GOP* 976 (10 Sep 1898): 792-793.

of the street was broken by a heavenly voice issuing clear and sweet from the throat of the most exquisite ballad-singer on the English boards':

From beneath a tattered bonnet, from within a greasy shawl  
That unerring tide of music filled with life the souls of all  
And the touch as of a spirit to their fluttered pulses clung  
With a strange enchanting rapture, as that ragged woman sung.<sup>36</sup>

The woman's voice appears strangely disembodied, emerging at odds with her 'tattered bonnet' and 'greasy shawl'. While he was not himself the poet, 'Octogenerian's' description of 'a heavenly voice issuing clear and sweet from the throat' is possibly the most revealing line here: it casts the 'voice', not Jordan, as the scene's active subject. Jordan herself (not even Jordan, in fact - her disembodied 'throat') is simply a site, vessel for this unstoppable 'tide' of divine music.

'Octogenerian' makes it clear that this capacity to channel the divine is inherently feminine: 'could this story...have been told if the singer had been a man instead of a woman?' No male singers, he observed, thrilled him as much as a female voice. 'Who that has hung entranced on one of those exquisite female voices which the Church of Rome know so well how to utilise and press into service can doubt that it is unsurpassable in its thrilling effects on the human heart?'

As Felicia Miller Frank has pointed out, the Romantic 'fetishization' of women's voices was deeply problematic - not least in woman's apparent absence from the song that channeled through her.<sup>37</sup> Yet it was this absence that permitted correspondents like 'Octogenerian' to make the case for women in sacred music. For women's voices were capable of transcending female bodies to give voice to the divine.

### **The 'Embodied' Angelic Voice**

Yet while 'Octogenerian' cast female voices as 'angelic' in older sense of the term, other correspondents invoked women's capacity for 'angelic' singing in the word's newer meaning: domestic, feminine. This was a very different argument. For while the older 'angelic' meant the ethereal channeled *through* a woman's body, in the term's newer sense woman *was* the angel. When the 'angel in the house' sang, she expressed something intrinsic to her body. Specifically, she expressed that intrinsic charm and

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<sup>36</sup> Octogenerian, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 20 Aug 1889.

<sup>37</sup> Frank, *Mechanical Song*, pp.3-4.

selflessness that Virginia Woolf so despised ('if there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it').<sup>38</sup>

Here, it is again worth reviewing literary precedent. The idea that the voice is materially entangled with the body goes back as far as the idea of singer as channel. These two contradictory discourses grew up alongside one another. In the words of Roman poet Titus Lucretius Carus, translated and expanded into verse by Thomas Creech in the early eighteenth century:

All sound is body; for with painful force  
it moves the sense, when with an eager course  
it scrapes the jaws, and makes the speaker hoarse  
The crowding Seeds of Sound, that strive to go  
Thro' narrow Nerves, grate them in passing through:  
'Tis certain then that Voice, which thus can wound  
Is all Material: Body every Sound.<sup>39</sup>

If singing was corporeal, then singing was sexual. Music-making had long been understood as a courtship ritual. Sarah Webster Goodwin has observed that in the late eighteenth century, 'the woman who sings displays herself, in an artform that – discreetly or indiscreetly – calls attention to the body'.<sup>40</sup> Boston phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler, writing in the late nineteenth century, agreed: 'every vocal utterance is sexed...all states of the sexuality are reported in the voice'.<sup>41</sup>

But female voices were not always seen as erotic. In the Victorian period, female corporeal vocality came to be connected to with a new discourse of feminine purity. Over the century, representations of women as 'moral guardians' were codified in scientific and medical theory. Women were pathologically 'angelic'.

This new discourse of the 'angelic' female body is visible in Doctor J. G. Milligen *Passions*, published in 1848. Female bodies, Milligen argued, were physiologically more attuned to emotion than male bodies: 'women, with her exalted spiritualism, is more

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<sup>38</sup> Woolf, 'Professions for Women'.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Creech, *T. Lucretius Carus, Of the Nature of Things, in Six Books, Translated Into English Verse* (1714), p. 348.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Leslie C Dunn, 'Ophelia's songs in *Hamlet*: Music, Madness and the Feminine' in *Embodied Voices*, ed. Dunn and Jones: 50-64. See also Regula Hohl Trillini, *The Gaze of the Listener: English Representations of Domestic Music-making* (2008).

<sup>41</sup> Orson Squire Fowler, *Sexual Science, including Manhood, Womanhood, and their Mutual Interrelations* (1870), p. 194.

forcibly under control of matter; her sensations are more vivid and acute, her sympathies more irresistible'.<sup>42</sup> The idea that women were physiologically calibrated to 'feel' more than men became increasingly common towards the end of the century. Woman had 'a cell less in the head, a fibre more in the heart', wrote anthropologist J. McGregor Allan in 1881: she was 'less guided by intellect than by feeling and impulse'. Six years later, psychologist George Romanes argued that women's bodies excelled in 'affection, sympathy, devotion...reverence, veneration, religious feeling'.<sup>43</sup> In 1889, the influential work *The Evolution of Sex*, by biologist Patrick Geddes and naturalist J. Arthur Thomson, stated that women were by nature 'anabolic', while men were 'katabolic'. 'The more active males', they argued, 'may have bigger brains and more intelligence; but the females, especially as mothers, have indubitably a larger and more habitual share of the altruistic emotions'.<sup>44</sup>

As an extension of the body, a woman's voice was shaped by her unique constitution. For Orson Squire Fowler, writing in 1870, the female voice was capable of greater expression than the male:

The voice of well-sexed [i.e., sexually healthy] woman - the highest terrestrial example of these love tones - was doubtless pitched on a key an octave higher than man's for the very purpose of expressing this love better. Her vocal expression is far more charming than that of man, because she is more loving than he.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, for lawyer Benno Loewy, the health of 'the genital organs of man or woman, or their abuse, betrays itself in the voice'. 'The prostitute who degrades her body', he argued, 'is soon known by the harsh croak which is so offensive to the sensitive ear'; a healthy, 'womanly' woman 'has pure, sweet, high tones'.<sup>46</sup>

This idea that women's voices expressed women's intrinsic emotional sensitivity dominated the *Telegraph* debate. One correspondent, M. Kingston, opined that 'you cannot get boys to feel the music they are singing': ladies 'have a deeper fund of expression'.<sup>47</sup> Chas. McLeod Carey agreed: 'those who have had to do with both sexes will know that there is generally more aptness, more docility, more feeling, and

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<sup>42</sup> Dr. J. G. Milligen, *The Passions; or Mind and Matter* in Sally Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation: Medical Discourse and Popular Advertising in the Mid-Victorian Era', in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, Sally Shuttleworth (1990): 55.

<sup>43</sup> Patricia Murphy, *In Science's Shadow: Literary Constructions of Late Victorian Women* (2006), pp. 11-12.

<sup>44</sup> Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thompson, *The Evolution of Sex* (1889), available at <<https://archive.org/details/evolutionsex01geddgoog>> [accessed 11/11/14], pp. 270-271

<sup>45</sup> Fowler, *Sexual Science*, p. 195.

<sup>46</sup> Benno Loewy, *The Truth about Love: a Proposed Sexual Morality Based Upon the Doctrine of Evolution, and Recent Discoveries in Medical Science* (1872), pp. 114-115.

<sup>47</sup> M. Kingston, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 21 Aug 1889.

generally more love for what is beautiful in girls and women than in boys and men.’<sup>48</sup> ‘Indicus’, meanwhile, praised ‘the pure and powerful notes of trained and earnest women, singing with skilled voices, and that sincere reverence which the feminine heart easily and naturally feels’.<sup>49</sup> For Anita Austin, women’s voices were likewise

Sweet, telling, and true, and much sympathy can be expressed, where this is lost in the boy’s voice, for girls are naturally more intelligent and quicker to understand the meaning of their words...the light and shade, entreaty and passion which are required, cannot be better given than by a girl’s pure, sympathetic voice, so telling and sweet, coupled with the knowledge and due appreciation of the words.<sup>50</sup>

To modern readers, these arguments may not seem so radical, problematically grounded in sexual essentialism. Situated in broader historical context, however, the embodied, emotional woman was arguably a *more* radical concept than the sexless, ethereal Romantic soprano. For, as we noted earlier, woman could only become a conduit for celestial choirs by silencing her own voice. By contrast, ‘angel in the house’ rhetoric, celebrates the woman herself; her singing expresses her innate depths of feeling. Given that Christianity had, for centuries, denied women religious agency on the grounds of bodily ‘impurity’, this development was remarkable.

### **Appearing in Public**

Both of these figures – the divine conduit, and the ‘angel in the house’ – mattered in the ‘Angelic Quire’ controversy. For the time being, though, this chapter will continue to focus on the latter. Significantly, most opponents of female choristers chose to level their criticism on these grounds.

They did so because the opportunity was obvious. The ‘angel in the house’ could be an empowering figure for female choristers. But she was hardly an unproblematic ideal for defenders of women in choirs. The biggest obstacle was in her name: the ‘angel in the house’. For while angels were expressive and musical, so too were they domestic, modest, and retiring. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Hannah More had drawn attention to modesty as ‘*the* most valued female characteristic’.<sup>51</sup> During the Victorian period, this rhetoric intensified. Women were universally encouraged to avoid personal display - to keep themselves covered, to avoid referring to body parts and their functions, and to subdue their movements.<sup>52</sup> As a corporeal act, singing, too, was

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<sup>48</sup> Chas. McLeod Carey, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 27 Aug 1889.

<sup>49</sup> Indicus, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

<sup>50</sup> Anita Austin, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 17 Aug 1889

<sup>51</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 170

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 399.

considered an immodest exhibition. As More had written in 1777, ‘a low [i.e., quiet] voice and soft address are the common indicators of a well bred woman’.<sup>53</sup>

The ideal of female modesty cast long shadows on women of the stage. Throughout the nineteenth century, professional actresses and singers were regarded with utmost suspicion. Performance was understood, in Adam Smith’s words, as ‘a sort of public prostitution’<sup>54</sup> As Tracy Davies has observed, women who offered themselves on the stage as ‘public objects of scrutiny’ were considered immoral, ‘no matter what their private lives were like. The Victorian theatre and prostitution were alike in that they both traded on sensuality and pleasure, with women as the commodity’.<sup>55</sup>

Theatrical careers became more respectable for women towards the end of the century. But stigma persisted. Jesse Fothergill’s 1878 novel *The First Violin*, concerns a gifted young singer with a voice of ‘pure, exquisite melody’. Upon hearing that the girl could one day become an opera singer, her governess’s reaction is typical of middle class views of theatrical women. “The stage!” exclaims Miss Hallam, ‘with a slight shiver. “That is quite out of the question. Miss Wedderburn is a young lady — not an actress...Those kind of things may be all very well for one set of people, but not for that class to which Miss Wedderburn belongs. Her father is a clergyman’.<sup>56</sup>

Concerns regarding female modesty had proven a barrier to the use of women in church choirs earlier in the century. John Antes Latrobe, in an 1831 tract on church music, argued:

The natural modesty of the female character requires, that in the performance of their sacred duties, ‘the singing women’ should not be too prominently exposed to the public gaze. Nothing is more beautiful and feminine than retiring modesty...what can be more unpleasant, than to see a female with unabashed front, standing up in the presence of full congregation, and with outstretched neck, screaming above the voices of the multitude, and the swell of the organ, like a seagull in a tempest!<sup>57</sup>

Following Latrobe’s lead, in 1846 a *Parish Choir* correspondent argued that singing in church was ‘contrary to, and destructive of, that “modesty and shamefacedness”, which

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<sup>53</sup> Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (1991)

<sup>54</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Book 1, Ch. 10. Available online at <<http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWVN.html>> [accessed 11/11/14].

<sup>55</sup> Tracy C. Davies, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (2002), p. 81.

<sup>56</sup> Jesse Fothergill, *The First Violin* (1878), chapters IX and XIX. Available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/29219>> [accessed 22/03/15].

<sup>57</sup> Latrobe, *Music of the Church*, p. 118



is an essential part of the true female character'.<sup>58</sup> For Frederick Helmore, writing in 1865, the choir's prominent position would 'make females shirk from joining it'. Noting that women sang in some churches out of musical necessity, he added that 'no expression of gratitude can be too strong in thanking those devoted women and girls, who, in so many places, have overcome their feminine diffidence under a high sense of duty'.<sup>59</sup>

Certainly, choir stalls were exposed. One can get a feel of the scrutiny choristers fell under from two fictional depictions of church singing: the interlude to Sarah Grand's 1891 'New Woman' manifesto *The Heavenly Twins*, and a short story titled 'A Blind Love', published in *The Temple Magazine* nine years later.<sup>60</sup> These two works portray their protagonists, both choir members, as the subject of public attention, not altogether free from erotic interest. Grand's hero is a tenor, 'regarded with much curiosity' by the congregation, who praise him for his 'dark dreamy gray eyes' and 'tumbled mop of golden hair'. His voice is 'so sweet, that people held their breath and looked up'.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, the *Temple's* heroine Seraphina (an angelic name!) is subjected to the desiring gaze of a doctor in the congregation. The first time she sings, he 'had turned his glasses towards her...and had not moved his eyes till she had finished'. A decade later, he still 'openly put on his glasses to listen to the anthem' and 'fixed his eyes on Seraphina while she sang'.

Fears of similar exposure informed real-world Victorian attempts to obscure female church singers documented in Chapter One: 'a few women are placed directly behind the choir stalls of the surpliced choir, where they are *not too obstructively visible*'.<sup>62</sup>

Concerns regarding female exposure also preoccupied many *Telegraph* correspondents. Several readers, even those who preferred the sound of female voices, worried that a choir of surpliced women would be 'an immense attraction'. Many suggested that the innovation would cause men to flock to the services for all the wrong reasons. 'The choir must not be converted into a mere spectacle for idle "mashers" to stare at and ribald 'Arrys to "take off" for the delectation of the frisky companions of the

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<sup>58</sup> 'Female Choristers and Organists', *The Parish Choir* 1 (1846): 72.

<sup>59</sup> Frederick Helmore, *Church Choirs* (1865), p. 58.

<sup>60</sup> Grand, Sarah, 'The Tenor and the Boy - an Interlude' in *The Heavenly Twins* (1891) Available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8676/pg8676.txt>> [accessed 29/09/14]; Annie E. Holdsworth, 'A Blind Love', *The Temple Magazine* 4 (August 1900): 949-957.

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Grand, 'The Tenor and the Boy — An Interlude', in *The Heavenly Twins* (1891). Available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8676/pg8676.txt>> [accessed 29/09/14].

<sup>62</sup> Zara, 'Women in Church Choirs', 13:145 (1889): 32.

softer sex' declared one correspondent.<sup>63</sup> Another writer highlighted the choir's 'prominent position to the body of worshippers, with whom they naturally interchange glances, inviting the critical looks of fair admirers'.<sup>64</sup> Others suggested that if women were to be used, 'some unostentatious place can be found'; perhaps that women could 'occupy seats at the back of the choir stalls'.<sup>65</sup> 'If choirs are mixed' noted correspondent Arthur Edwards, 'ladies would prefer to take their appointed seats behind the men and boys - freed from all the attraction - or otherwise - that some modern garb must make them.'<sup>66</sup> Rupert S. Ledger contended that it would be 'highly inexpedient to station our lady choristers in the chancel...let us, by all means, utilise ladies' voices in a definite and organised way, but let us not in our chivalrous zeal place the fair vocalists in an invidious position'.<sup>67</sup> These concerns were not confined to the pages of the *Telegraph*: a cartoon published in *The Burnley Express* depicted two male parishioners exchanging glances with an attractive woman chorister (see figure 9).

### **The Problem of Dress**

Criticisms of female display were not always so explicit. Opponents of female choristers also condemned the angel's departure from the house in more oblique ways. Most obvious in this regard were discussions of attire – the topic that had first sparked the debate and dominated the *Telegraph's* pages throughout the controversy.

Over and again in the 'Angelic Quire' controversy, correspondents expressed anxieties about women appearing in public by voicing distaste for female *clothing*. 'A Conservative Vicar' objected to the prospect of seeing 'unspiritual hats, bonnets, and various other toilette accessories' in the choir stalls.<sup>68</sup> 'Octogenerian', despite his support for women's voices, reported with horror the sartorial state of female choristers in America, where dress was 'invariably moulded on the latest Parisian fashions'.<sup>69</sup> Correspondent 'Hodgson' explained that 'the great objection to the female sex being permitted to help in the "Praise and Glory of God" has been the matter of suitable dress'.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas May, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 17 Aug 1889; East Anglian, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 16 Aug 1889.

<sup>64</sup> Brompton, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 16 Aug 1889.

<sup>65</sup> Minister 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 17 Aug 1889; 'A sub-choirmaster', *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

<sup>66</sup> Arthur Edwards, *DT* 28 Aug 1889.

<sup>67</sup> Rupert St. Leger, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 27 Aug 1889.

<sup>68</sup> A Conservative Vicar, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 15 Aug 1889.

<sup>69</sup> Octogenerian, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 20 Aug 1889.

<sup>70</sup> Hodgson, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 20 Aug 1889.



**Figure 9:** A robed female chorister exchanges a glance with two men in the congregation. 'Notes', *The Burnley Express*, 7 Sep 1889.

Evidence from earlier discussions of female choristers shows that Hodgson's diagnosis was no exaggeration. Writing a satirical account of the 'woman versus boys' debate as a historian from the year 2869, William Glover cast dress as a central issue:

The singers, like the Aztecs, were valued for their littleness, and the smaller brain of the boy was preferred to the larger intelligence of the woman. Reason was thought to be on one side, and prejudice on the other; but the sacred subject of dress was a fatal obstacle, and in spite of the Psalmist's authority for musical 'damsels', a man who proposed to employ the greater brain for the work was requested to choose between the title of heretic and the repose of an asylum....Thus it is clear that with these sturdy Britons matters of custom and dress are of solemn and paramount importance; and, after these - reason and sense - if introduced in a careful and limited matter.<sup>71</sup>

This emphasis on what women wore might seem to miss the wood for the trees - certainly, this was how it seemed to Glover. Yet female dress was indeed the crux of the

<sup>71</sup> William Glover, 'Boy Trebles v. Women', *MSt* 11:270 (1869): 166.

matter. In this, the debate reflected pervasive gendered understandings of the functions of dress across Victorian society more generally.

Differences between male and female dress grew starker towards the end of the eighteenth century. In what is now known as ‘the great masculine renunciation’, during this period men renounced the brilliant clothing of the Georgian era in favour of sober three-piece suits.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, women’s clothing developed a greater focus on the female form: a renewed focus on the waist and hips, lower-cut bodices, and exposed shoulders. Through form, style, cut, and colour, garments worked, as Eicher and Roach-Higgins argue, to ‘precede verbal communication in establishing an individual’s gendered identity’.<sup>73</sup>

Dress also served as an essential means of indicating both social status and spatial location in the visual vocabulary of the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> Middle class women variously wore outfits from ball gowns to nightclothes, tea dress to Sunday finery, depending on the spaces they occupied. In this sense, ‘women’s gendered appearance...not only defined her femininity but also systematically and simultaneously distinguished her place’.<sup>75</sup> Thus uncertainty over what to wear leaves *Mansfield Park*’s Fanny Price with concerns ‘sometimes almost beyond the happiness’ that she felt at the approach of her first ball. Her unhappiness comes not from vanity, but from an acute perception of the need to choose attire that can simultaneously affirm her precarious social position and, as Judith Butler puts it, ‘do [her] gender right’.<sup>76</sup> Therefore ‘young and inexperienced, with no small means of choice and no confidence in her own taste, the “how she should be dressed” was a point of painful solicitude’.<sup>77</sup>

Dress not only demonstrated but enforced a woman’s social status and spatial location – and indeed her subservience. As Carol Mattingly writes:

If an arbitrary decision is made that plainness and sobriety of dress are the pre-requisites of the governing sex, and the other sex is encouraged, or even forced,

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<sup>72</sup> The canonical text on the so-called ‘great masculine renunciation’ is John C. Flügel’s *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930). More recently, see David Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England 1550-1850* (2002).

<sup>73</sup> Joanne B. Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, ‘Definition and Classification of Dress: Implications for Analysis of Gender Roles’, in *Dress and Gender*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (1992): 17.

<sup>74</sup> Carol Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress: Women’s Rhetorical Style in Nineteenth Century America* (2002), especially pp. 1-16.

<sup>75</sup> Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress*, p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1993), p.140.

<sup>77</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814), ch. XXXVI. Available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/141/pg141.txt>> [accessed 29/09/14].

into an obsessive preoccupation with decorative variations in dress, then that sex cannot post a serious challenge to the hegemony of the governing sex.<sup>78</sup>

Thus criticism of female chorister's clothing was a means of objecting to their presence in choir stalls in the first place. To say that there were no appropriate garments for female choristers was to say that women were unfit for liturgical singing.

In a similar vein, Victorian critics – and indeed supporters – of female public speakers displayed an almost obsessive focus on their attire. American newspaper columnist Fanny Fern asked in 1870:

[C]an anybody tell me why reporters, in making mention of lady speakers, always consider it to be necessary to report, fully and *firstly*, the dresses worn by them?<sup>79</sup>

Crucially, focusing on dress offered commentators a way to oppose women's entry to public spaces without making their reproof explicit. This allowed critics of female singers to maintain a veneer of 'chivalry' even as they censured women's incursion into the choir stalls. So, too, did sartorial rhetoric offer a way to condemn female bodies without actually discussing the bodies themselves – ever a taboo in nineteenth century discourse.

Fanny Fern's despair demonstrates that censure of female dress was a socially acceptable form of criticism across Victorian public discourse. This was undoubtedly more so in the context of the Anglican service, where clothing was universally acknowledged to carry crucial ritual significance. Clerical dress had indeed been subject to intense discussion throughout the century.<sup>80</sup> In these ways, the intense criticism of female choristers' dress that ran throughout the 'Angelic Quire' debate offered a way simultaneously to express and to avoid the crux of the controversy: female bodies appearing in public.

### **Angels out of the House: Wilkinson's Robes**

Dress accordingly received fierce attention from female choristers' opponents. Supporters of women in church music were then obliged to address the subject directly. Advocating Wilkinson's female choir robes offered an ideal means of doing so, and were

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<sup>78</sup> Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress*, p. 10.

<sup>79</sup> Fanny Fern, 'Lady Lectures', *New York Ledger* (1870), cited in Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress*, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> The question of whether surplices were appropriate attire for clergymen had been intensely debated earlier in the century, though by 1889 point was generally settled in favour of the attire. See, for instance, 'Thrilling Views of the Surplice Question', *The Eclectic Review* 12 (Mar 1867): 236-252.

taken up enthusiastically by many correspondents. For promoting a specific female chorister dress offered a way to counter objections premised upon a supposed lack of suitable clothing on their own terms. Wilkinson's innovation asserted women's right to appear in public while still guarding that 'angelic' purity that made their voices suitable for worship in the first place.

In 1889, analogous sartorial developments were occurring across society. During the late nineteenth century, women's role expanded across a range of spheres: employment, politics, education. Across these spaces, women and their advocates took care to devise appropriate forms of dress to secure women's precarious foothold. The most prominent example was the development of uniforms for women in professions. Innovations such as nurses' dresses enabled professional women to assume a 'non-sexual femininity'.<sup>81</sup> But Mattingly has pointed out many other, subtler examples elsewhere in society. The American Woman's Christian Temperance Union maintained a close attention to members' appearance. Its women – interlopers in the typically male arena of political advocacy – were encouraged to dress moderately in order to foster an image of sober, considered femininity. In advert displaying recommended patterns for the movement, Annie Jenness Miller emphasised that dress was 'all important, for it marks the refinement of character as unmistakably as does the behaviour or conversation'. 'In the future', she asserted, 'more, and not less, attention will be paid to dress'.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, a small yet significant group of more *avant garde* women – typically actresses and writers – started to appropriate masculine clothing as a way of asserting independence.<sup>83</sup> As Mattingly comments, 'if identities were fashioned according to bodies/clothing and the places/spaces those bodies were permitted to inhabit, clothing used for transgressing social, economic, racial, and gendered demarcations communicated for wearers in a manner that no other dress could'.<sup>84</sup>

It was in this context of an expanding female sphere – sartorial as well as spatial – that the idea to robe female choristers gained traction. As noted in Chapter Two, prior to the 'Angelic Quire' correspondence there were probably no more than two examples of robed female choirs in Britain – in Birmingham and in Skelton-in-Cleveland. Yet even though robed female choristers were few in number, the idea quickly gained support in the 'Angelic Quire' debate'. Advocates of female singers embraced the garment as a

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<sup>81</sup> Kathryn McPherson, *Beside Matters: the Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900-1990* (1999), p. 86; see also Elizabeth Ewing, *Women in Uniform throughout the Centuries* (1975); Jane Brooks and Anne Marie Rafferty, 'Dress and Distinction in Nursing, 1860-1939: "A corporate (as well as corporeal) armour of probity and purity"', *Women's History Review* 16:1 (2007): 41-57.

<sup>82</sup> Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress*, p.111-115.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 89-106.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 85,

means of countering claims that women could not wear Sunday finery in the chancel. 'The robe and cap being worn by all would be a great advantage,' wrote 'R.B', 'as then none would be interested in her neighbour's costume'.<sup>85</sup> Anita Austin agreed: 'there could not be any emulation about dress, if the wise fashion of a white becoming surplice were uniformly adopted'.<sup>86</sup> 'Indicus' likewise argued that the female robe 'will suppress all dangerous emulation in attire...without coquetry or display'.<sup>87</sup>

Wilkinson's designs made a case for female choristers in several ways. Firstly, at the most basic level, creating and employing a special costume for female choristers was a clear symbolic statement that women could occupy choir stalls during services. A robed female chorister was not simply seen, but *intended* to be seen.

In addition to this, using a detailed description of Wilkinson's church sent in by the correspondent 'Traveller', as well as images of the robes themselves published in the *Temple Magazine* and the *Musical Herald* (see figures 10 and 11), allow several more observations. Strikingly, the garments were clearly not designed so as *not* to obscure the female form. On Wilkinson's model, four large pleats were installed at the back of the waist. These widened as they went down to accommodate bustles and hooped skirts. Meanwhile, ribbons were used to define the waist sharply.<sup>88</sup> From a rear-view image printed in *The Musical Herald* a few months after the *Telegraph* correspondence, it is evident that these features made the wearer's figure clearly visible. Therefore unlike modern-day androgynous surplices, these garments did not attempt to efface femininity. Rather, they made a point of it. Also significant was the use of white, signalling purity, and the garment's sleeves, which puffed and tapered towards the bottom. The effect was not unreminiscent of wings.

In these ways, Wilkinson's robes offered a visual representation of ideal 'angelic' womanhood. The garments were virginal, spiritual, feminine. Like the dresses recommended by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, these clothes reasserted comforting notions of femininity at the same time as challenging one of the fundamental tenets of middle class gender ideology – female public modesty. In short, the designs embodied the argument that women's voices brought an 'angelic' femininity to the service, while at the same time underlining even more strongly their right to

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<sup>85</sup> R.B., 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 24 Aug 1889.

<sup>86</sup> Anita Austin, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

<sup>87</sup> Indicus, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

<sup>88</sup> Traveller, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 19 Aug 1889.





**Figure 10:** The Halford sisters, first robed women to sing at St. Luke's Church, Birmingham. Alfred E. Hanscomb, 'Some Famous Choirs', *The Temple Magazine* (Aug. 1900): 965.





**Figure 11:** Rear view of one of Wilkinson's robed female choristers. 'Lady Choristers', *MH* (1 Sep 1889): 197.

appear before a congregation. Depicting the female chorister as 'angel of the house' was ironically a means of legitimizing female presence outside the domestic sphere.

Wilkinson accordingly chose to make his female choir robes white – angelic. But white robes were in another sense risky; they might be mistaken for a 'female surplice'. This was categorically not the intention of the robes' advocates. Correspondents tellingly scrabbled around looking for any other word to describe the innovation. Possibilities included 'uniform', 'costume', 'robe', 'official dress', and 'sacque' - a type of eighteenth century woman's gown with no obvious similarity other than also being relatively loose. The frequent use of inverted commas around these terms indicates that correspondents recognised their inadequacy. However, few alternatives were available. Correspondent 'St. Cecilia' chose to state the difference explicitly:

A 'vestment' such as a stole, chasuble, or alb, implies and involves the idea that its wearer should exercise some sacerdotal function, which of course no woman pretends to. But the 'white robe' is nothing but a sacred sign and emblem that its

wearer is devoted to the assistance of that part of the service which...belongs to the people and not to the priest.<sup>89</sup>

Other correspondents dispensed with the idea of a white robe - despite its useful associations with purity - advocating alternatives such as 'light dresses and bright bonnets of spring', and 'a dress and bonnet similar to that of our hospital nurses, or the women of the Salvation Army'.<sup>90</sup>

### **'Ladies in Surplices'**

Yet despite these attempts to sweeten the pill, Wilkinson's 'white robes' provoked a violent reaction. According to 'A Literary Women', the proposed garment

would always present itself as repugnant, however beautiful the voices themselves might be. Literature, stagecraft, and the other various and beautiful arts are open to woman. Let her at least eschew an attempt to introduce the grotesque into that temple which is an earthly symbol of one not made by hands.<sup>91</sup>

H.H. Willmott agreed, lamenting that 'one is at a loss to understand how the idea of dressing ladies in such garments could have suggested itself even to the wildest votary of aestheticism'.<sup>92</sup>

Inevitably, correspondents who objected to Wilkinson's robe seized on its similarities to the male surplice. Willmott declared that 'surplices and mortarboards are distinctly ecclesiastical, and therefore male attire'. Meanwhile, according to S. S. Wynell-Mayow:

There seems no reason why [women's] voices should not be used in the service of praise. But when some of your correspondents propose that they should be dressed in cassock and surplice, they forget that this garb is only allowed to choir men and boys, because *pro tem.* these are in the position of ecclesiastics. The cassock and surplice are the official dress of clericals in minor orders; but, as by canon law, no woman can exercise an ecclesiastical function, the dress would be completely out of place in a quire of ladies, and would lose all significance if worn by them.<sup>93</sup>

Several writers cast the 'robe' as beginning a slippery slope towards female ordination. 'If we are to put ladies into surplices', wrote one correspondent, 'we may as well have

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<sup>89</sup> St Cecilia, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 15 Aug 1889.

<sup>90</sup> An American Clergyman, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 22 Aug 1889; John Rhodes, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 16 Aug 1889.

<sup>91</sup> A Literary Woman, 'Angelic Quire', *DT*, 24 Aug 1889.

<sup>92</sup> H. H. Willmott, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 24 Aug 1889.

<sup>93</sup> S. S. Wynell-Mayow, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 23 Aug 1889.

lady clergy, lady church wardens, sideswomen, lady lay readers, & c.’<sup>94</sup> ‘An additional zest to the proceedings’ joked Thomas May, ‘would result from the monthly practice of a lady in the pulpit’.<sup>95</sup> ‘If we are to have surpliced female choristers’, argued R. Graham Harvey, ‘then, at the same time, do away with our clergy and let us have priestesses’.<sup>96</sup> Of course, these deliberate or accidental misinterpretations were greatly aided by the *Telegraph*’s inflammatory strap line, ‘ladies in surplices’. It will be clear by now that this title was highly provocative: not an accurate summary of the debate, but an attempt to induce further disagreement through misrepresenting the aims of female choristers’ advocates.

Indeed, the idea of women *actually* wearing surplices, and - by extension - of women wielding religious authority – seemed as obviously absurd to supporters of women in choirs as it did to their opponents. Yes, the late nineteenth century was a time where female agency grew within the Anglican Church. Historians have noted that by the 1880’s women were running voluntary religious organisations at not just at a parochial, but regional, and even national level.<sup>97</sup> Women also worked in an increasingly professional capacity as district visitors.<sup>98</sup> The revival of the deaconess movement had offered women further authority within the organisation of the Church, though their exact clerical status remained extremely ambiguous.<sup>99</sup> But actual female ordination was not yet an open question. Running a voluntary organization, while a significant responsibility, was a far cry from assuming a liturgical function. Moreover, the number of deaconesses was tiny: just 232 in 1893.<sup>100</sup>

More to the point, opponents of woman choristers who eschewed the concept of a female ‘surplice’ clearly did not find the idea threatening. Rather, it was funny. ‘Funny’, notably, was a word that R. Graham Harvey used to describe the robes. He was not alone in finding humour. Inspired by the ‘Angelic Quire’ correspondence, the *Penny Illustrated Paper* and *Punch* - two comic journals, both culturally conservative - published sketches imagining women in a variety of ‘feminine’ ecclesiastical costumes, from incense boy attire to bishops’ robes (see figures 12 and 13). It is evident that both were intended as ridiculous jokes. It does not seem likely that magazines such as this

<sup>94</sup> A Sub-Choirmaster, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas May, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

<sup>96</sup> R. Graham Harvey, ‘Angelic Quire’, 20 Aug 1889.

<sup>97</sup> Brian Heeney, ‘Women’s Struggle for Professional Work and Status in the Church of England, 1900-1930’, *Historical Journal* 26:2 (1983): 330-1.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>99</sup> Henrietta Blackmore, ‘Autonomous Mission and Ecclesiastical Authority: The Revival of the Deaconess Order in the Church of England, 1850-1900’, DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford (2004), p. 320.

<sup>100</sup> Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, *The Official Year-Book of the Church of England* (1893), p. xviii

would have published images of women in ecclesiastical costume had there seemed any risk their suggestions might be adopted. The joke would have faced too great a risk of misinterpretation. The sense, then, was less 'we may as well have lady clergy...' and more 'we may as well have lady clergy!'



**Figure 12 (above):** 'Ecclesiastical Fashions for Ladies', *Punch* (28 Sep 1889): 147.

**Figure 13 (below):** 'The Angelic Quire', *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times* (24 Aug 1889): 194.



Therefore emphasising the similarities between female choristers' robes and male clerical attire was an act of *reductio ad absurdum*. Correspondents mocked female 'surplices' in an attempt to suppress the aspect of the innovation that they truly did find threatening: the implication that women could legitimately appear before a congregation's public gaze. For this, unlike female ordination, was genuinely possible. Women were gaining audiences across middle class society as public speakers, lecturers, and opera singers. The real threat Wilkinson's robes posed to the status quo was that they permitted women to be 'angelic' without being confined to the house in purported concern for their feminine modesty.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore this chapter finishes where it began. The core argument over femininity in the *Telegraph* debate was not one of surplices or female ordination, notwithstanding frequent references to both 'radical' ideas. Rather, it was about something altogether more familiar: woman's angelic femininity. The central question was one of appropriate space for women. How far could a woman stray from the house and still remain an 'angel'?

Positioning female singers as 'angelic' was far from radical in nineteenth century culture, even if it was a departure from older traditions in the depiction both of women and of angels. During the Victorian period, images of 'angelic' women suffused middle class society. Yet this emphasis on woman's pure capacity for spiritual feeling came entwined with a doctrine of modesty and domesticity. The Victorian 'angel' was an 'angel in the house'. Incorporating women into church choirs challenged this doctrine. It placed women's bodies uncomfortably on view before the gaze of the congregation.

For some advocates of female singers, this challenge resulted in an uncomfortable tension, prompting attempts to hide women from view. But others saw it as an entirely appropriate extension of women's sphere, which was already expanding across middle class society.

Faced with criticism from cultural conservatives, proponents of female choristers attempted to legitimise women's presence through devising an appropriate costume. Yet given the existing visual vocabulary of the Anglican Church, it was hard to emphasise female singers' purity and femininity without inadvertently implying clerical office. Therefore female singers' opponents could easily argue that women's robes looked inappropriately ecclesiastical. Given the embryonic state of church feminism, this argument effectively left the innovation dead in the water. The robed female choir therefore met with only limited approval.

It was ultimately the sight of female singers, not their sound, that kept them out of late nineteenth century choir stalls. Victorians thought differently about women's vocal and visual presence. Female voices were universally lauded, both for their intrinsic sweetness and - as the following chapter will demonstrate - for their capacity to perform difficult music. Yet women's appearance posed a far greater challenge to the doctrine of separate spheres. It is not immediately obvious why this was the case, further research is needed on this between Victorian visual and aural understandings of gender. However, one possible explanation can be found by finally returning to other, older meaning of 'angelic' discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Female voices had been associated with the divine since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and that link remained strong by 1889. During the 'Angelic Quire' correspondence, attempts to position women's voices as celestial conduits were less prominent than efforts to portray actual, embodied women as 'angels'. Less prominent, perhaps, but not absent. The room for manoeuvre that made woman's sound so much more acceptable than her sight may well have inflexions of this older discourse of the 'angelic' female voice: woman as medium for something greater than herself. For this capacity to channel the sublime effectively effaced personal contribution, rendering the woman's bodies, and all the problems they entailed, absent from the music they produced.

In 1978, Roland Barthes famously wrote that the voice has a 'grain', the sound of 'the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages' within the singer's body.<sup>101</sup> Yet so too for Barthes did the voice have a *mélodie*, a 'language' that transcended its bodily resonance. Similarly, Victorians could both hear and not hear a singer's body in her sound. Ultimately, this ambiguity empowered female choristers. For 'voice', like 'angel', was simultaneously embodied and celestial. The double meaning left space for women to sing in public. In this, it offered Victorian 'angels of the house' a way out of the home and into the choir.

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<sup>101</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (1977), p. 181.

## Chapter Four

### Nineteenth Century Music and the Sounds of Sacred and Secular

Gender politics may have been central to the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate, but arguments over womanhood and female modesty sat within a wider web of concerns. Many of these had very little to do with women at all – at least, not explicitly.

Foremost among these were debates over aesthetics. Correspondents spent great time and energy debating which of boys’ or women’s voices ‘sounded’ better for church music. One camp argued that boys’ voices were more ‘pure’ and ‘ethereal’; the other, that women’s were more ‘rich’ and ‘expressive’.

Since the development of critical musicology in the 1990s, musicologists have been wary of taking this kind of debate at face value. Critical musicologists attempt to uncover the cultural agendas implicit in ostensibly purely ‘aesthetic’ preferences. Today, it is apparent that descriptions like ‘pure’ or ‘expressive’ are laden with gender and age politics.

Yet while it is now unfashionable to consider sound as a real aesthetic phenomenon, such an approach can be illuminating. Sound may not, as early musicologists argued, have intrinsic meaning. Yet differences in pitch, timbre and volume can certainly limit the range of associations a sound might assume – and the differences between boys’ and women’s voices were very real. Taking this contrast seriously brings out nuances in the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate that might otherwise go unnoticed.

This chapter therefore uses the sound differences between boys’ and women’s voices to explore a different side of the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate. By the late nineteenth century, boys’ and women’s distinct timbres had very different cultural associations. The question of boys versus women was one of situating church music within nineteenth century England’s wider aural landscape.

At a time when the church choirs’ status looked uncertain, this question of positioning became extremely important. During the 1880s, musicians were renegotiating the Tractarian choral revival that had begun forty years previously. For some, the distinct boy treble sound was necessary to foster a unique ‘church music’ aesthetic, at a time when the legitimacy of mainstream musical genres still stood in doubt. For others, a growing respect for artistic accomplishment encouraged the development of a more ‘secular’ style. For this, women’s voices were crucial. As this chapter will explore, these debates reflected wider tensions: nation, class, and denominational politics.

The ‘Angelic Quire’ debate was a debate about women and therefore – implicitly or explicitly – about gender roles. But understandings of ‘voice’ were also shaped by a web of interrelated concerns, from church politics to Englishness. Often, these interests were unacknowledged. Yet they were present throughout the debate, manifesting themselves, above all, in discussions of sound. The story concerned genre as much as gender.

### **Church music as ‘not music’: the need for sacred sound**

During the 1880s, a significant group of church musicians were anxious to distance their art from other musical genres. Their concern was a response to two mutually reinforcing pressures. Firstly, choirmasters and organists were conscious of mounting accusations that choirs impeded congregational singing – the principal aim of the choral service. Secondly, church musicians were keenly aware of a more general mistrust of musical endeavour within middle class culture.

As Chapter One shows, midcentury choral reform movements had placed congregational singing at the centre of Anglican music. The ‘choral service’ had emerged both from scriptural and historical precedents and from widespread understandings that group singing was beneficial to moral and physical health. Beliefs in salutary singing were promoted by the musical philanthropy movement, which peaked in the 1840s and was revived during the 1880s and 1890s.

During both waves of musical philanthropy, the idea of music as ‘art’ had been conspicuously absent. Philanthropic bands and orchestras were rarely considered to be ‘high’ culture. Partly, this resulted from the snobbish assumption that the working classes would not appreciate ‘fine’ music. Yet musical philanthropy’s aversion to ‘art’ also represented a deeper concern that pursuing ‘high music’ impeded the movements’ moralising focus. As John Curwen’s son, John Spencer, described his father’s singing-school movement:

The method was the indirect means of aiding worship, of holding young men and women among good influences, of reforming character, of spreading Christianity. The artistic aspect of the work done by the sol-fa method is indeed *less prominent* than its moral and religious influence [original emphasis].<sup>1</sup>

These priorities bled through to Tractarian choral reform. Supporters of congregational singing clearly sought a base level of competence among their parishioners. However,

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<sup>1</sup> John Spencer Curwen, *Music at the Queen’s Accession* (1897), cited in Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914: A Social History* (1997), p. 23.



the initiative was not an artistic one. Rather, they, like Curwen, sought to promote a moralising, edifying means of praising God: music that, as W.H. Plumstead put it, 'soothes the mind, purifies the heart, and excites devotional feelings'.<sup>2</sup>

If parishioners' voices lacked musical merit, this was part of their charm. In an address to the Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society in 1883, botanist and cleric Henry Higgins claimed:

There is a feeling of helpfulness, of helping and being helped, that has much to do with [congregational singing]. And I think this is the more because when a great multitude of people, untrained, sing together, the music is not very perfect. Some are disposed to be flat; others, the reverse; and some, it may be, are a little out of time. No matter, it all gets mixed up in a grand volume of sound; and there is withal a fellow-feeling that is thoroughly healthy, as well as grateful.<sup>3</sup>

As noted in Chapter One, the primary function of early Tractarian choirs had therefore been to lead congregational singing. Despite choristers' assistance, though, results rarely matched reformers' ambitions. In 1858, the *Tonic Sol-Fa Reporter* observed that 'though many laudable attempts have been made to realise [congregational singing], the results have thus far been far from encouraging. Except in Germany, congregational singing hardly exists'.<sup>4</sup> By the 1880s, very little had changed. In 1888, journalist James Blake Bailey lamented the fact that 'so many persons take not part, or, at the best, a very slight part in the congregational singing'.<sup>5</sup>

Yet by the late nineteenth century, church choirs' secondary duty – singing on *behalf* of the congregation – had flourished. Surpliced choirs proliferated across the country, and there had developed a very strong interest in improving choristers to the highest possible standard. At 'diocesan festivals', parish choirs were brought together with the aim of raising musical standards across the region. The first such festivals were held in Litchfield (1856) and Newbury (1857). By 1870 the festivals numbered 21 across the country. A further 16 had appeared by 1880, and between 1880 and 1889 28 more were established. Their scale was impressive: by 1889, each union of parishes averaged around 25 choirs, or several hundred singers. At times, the number was significantly greater. In July 1889, one month before the 'Angelic Quire' debate, the Church Sunday School Choir organised 6,000 people to sing at the Crystal Palace.

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<sup>2</sup> Plumstead, *Congregational Singing*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Henry H. Higgins. 'The Natural Theology of Music', reprinted in Jonathan L. Friedmann (ed.), *Music, Theology and Worship: Selected Writings 1841-1896* (2011), p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> 'Congregational Singing', *TSFR*, 1 Nov 1859.

<sup>5</sup> James Blake Bailey, 'Congregational Singing', *The National Review* 12:69 (1888): 428-432.

By the late nineteenth century, these initiatives were deemed to have been very successful in developing choir music. As an anonymous 1880 writer to the *Musical Standard* observed:

When choral associations were introduced years ago, ordinary church choirs were in such a deplorable condition that the festival services of united choirs effected a very desirable improvement, and doubtless contributed greatly to the increased attention and energy which have since been continually elevating the standard of church choirs.<sup>6</sup>

As choral standards rose, understandings of the choir's role evolved. Originally intended to lead congregational singing to music, choirs were increasingly understood as the musical voices of their parishioners. In an 1879 *Musical Standard* article, musician John Crowdy argued that choirs could be seen 'as a delegation or vicariate of the congregation, and assigned the work of rendering superior music, in a manner which only trained persons can'.<sup>7</sup> The following year, the *Tonic Sol-Fa Reporter* stated that choirs were widely seen as the 'practised mouthpiece of the congregation', able to express 'sentiments which can find voice in the hearts only, and not on the lips of the multitude'.<sup>8</sup> In 1886, the *Musical World* even argued that choristers served 'some sort of priestly function' through representing the congregation.<sup>9</sup> These writers maintained that choral and congregational music were in no way mutually exclusive. 'I think that congregational music and choir music may and should flourish side by side', wrote John Spencer Curwen in 1891. 'Each has its excellences...neither should extinguish the other'.<sup>10</sup>

With choirs flourishing and congregational singing still struggling, some began to blame congregational singing's struggles on choirs' success. For journalist James Blake Bailey, there was 'too much leaning to the view that the choir should sing for the people instead of with the people'. 'Unless the congregation are assisted and so enabled to take part in the singing', he argued, 'they are actually shut out from joining in the greater part of the public worship'.<sup>11</sup> In 1890, John Mitchinson, archdeacon of Leicester, argued that 'choirs, alike in town and country, are rapidly monopolising the service and ousting the congregation. Anthems, "services", elaborate and ornate responses are

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<sup>6</sup> T., 'Church Choral Associations', *MSt* 18:815 (1880): 173.

<sup>7</sup> 'Mr. Crowdy on Church Music', *MSt* 17:790 (1879):184-6.

<sup>8</sup> 'Parochial Choirs', *TSFR*, 1 Feb 1880: 38-41.

<sup>9</sup> 'What Part Should the Congregation Bear in the Music of the Church?' *MW* 64:43 (1886): 675.

<sup>10</sup> John Spencer Curwen, 'A Congregation without a Choir', *MH* 524 (1 Nov 1891): 336.

<sup>11</sup> James Blake Bailey, 'Congregational Singing' (1888)

becoming everywhere the order of the day; and the congregation are perforce again becoming dumb dogs'.<sup>12</sup>

Discontent about the balance between choir music and congregational singing developed into wider criticisms of 'choir music' as a concept. Principally, critics feared that choral anthems actually offered the non-singing congregation base aesthetic gratification, not vicarious worship. The *Tonic Sol-Fa Reporter* worried that 'too often in our churches...*worship* stops when the *musical performance* begins'.<sup>13</sup> It went on to note that

many good people who appear to be intent upon their individual salvation, cannot brook what they consider to be the inappropriateness of an anthem. They look upon its rendering as a musical display which ought to be relegated to the concert room.<sup>14</sup>

A writer to the *Musical Standard* in 1890 agreed:

High class singing may be well enough for sacred Concerts, but it does not do for church service...I have been in many churches, and have watched the people and heard the singing, and I have noticed that the congregation thoroughly disliked the torture of the choir-singing: of course it may be very grand, but it is not glory to our great common Father.<sup>15</sup>

By 1889, tensions were coming to a head. Their most striking manifestation came in the establishment, in February of that year, of the Church Congregational Music Association, led by Edward Griffith, FRCO. Aiming to foster 'simple, solid, devotional music for use in the service of the Church,' the Association was a strong advocate of congregational singing – and a harsh critic of choirs.<sup>16</sup> In 1891, Griffiths delivered an impassioned address to the Anglican Church Congress lamenting the 'painful' fact that 'responding and singing in our churches is now *not* congregational'. At his association's annual meeting the following year, this shortcoming was widely attributed to the 'tyranny of the choir'.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the CCMA was rather a fringe movement; in 1892, the *Musical Herald* observed that the group was 'few in numbers

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<sup>12</sup> Bishop J. Mitchinson, 'Uncongregational Singing', *MT* 31:571 (1890): 552.

<sup>13</sup> Congregational Singing', *TSFR* (1859)

<sup>14</sup> 'Parochial Choirs', *TSFR* (1990)

<sup>15</sup> *The Standard*, cited in 'Choir v. Congregation', *MT* 31:573 (1890): 649.

<sup>16</sup> 'Church Music', *MW* 69:8 (1889): 29.

<sup>17</sup> Temperley, *Parish Church Music*, p. 285; 'Church Congregational Music Association', *MH* 528 (1 Mar 1892): 72.

and slow to increase'.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, Griffith's association remained a forceful advocate of congregational music well into the 1890s.<sup>19</sup>

As one might expect, given both the focus of the 'Angelic Quire' debate and the occupational makeup of its correspondents, there was a general consensus that choirs and their music were useful institutions. Yet criticisms of the choir as a concept did emerge. Griffith himself contributed a letter, in which he lamented that the 'ever-increasing tendency to make our churches mere concert rooms, and therefore our congregations but gratified listeners, is gradually weaning the affections of our people from a proper use of our incomparable liturgy'.<sup>20</sup> A correspondent titled 'Baritone' likewise complained that 'too often in our churches the presence of the congregation, except as an audience, is ignored by the choir'. The one time he had dared to sing,

two or three ladies of the "Angelic Quire" type, who were standing near, turned around and stared. It was evidently a crime for a man to sing, and so I looked round the church and noticed that the few men who were there were silent, and looking very miserable.<sup>21</sup>

Yet while other correspondents may not have agreed with these criticisms, they would clearly have been conscious of the growing opposition to choral music. For as these two submissions indicate, by 1889, the choir's status was precarious. Having been granted a split function from the beginning of the Anglican Choral Revival, the institution stood accused not only of neglecting its congregational singing duties, but of turning the service into 'performance' and church into 'concert hall'. These concerns weighed heavily on the question of whether boys' or women's voices were more suited to church music.

### **Wider musical anxieties**

To understand why this was so, one must first unpack this spectre of the 'concert room' – an omnipresent bogeyman both in criticisms of choirs, and in criticisms of female choristers. Besides the association between 'concert room' and undesired congregational silence, the term was also loaded with anxieties regarding class, gender, and race. The image encapsulated not simply concerns that choir music was encroaching on congregational singing, but also a second cluster of wider anxieties concerning music's place in English culture.

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<sup>18</sup> 'Church Congregational Music Association', *MH* 543 (1 Jun 1893): 168.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Griffith, 'The Church Congregational Music Association', *The Magazine of Music* 13:9 (1896): 586.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Griffith, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 22 Aug 1889.

<sup>21</sup> Baritone, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

Since the 1990s music's problematic and contradictory status in Victorian society has been well documented by music historians. In certain spheres, music flourished. There was a great belief in music's moralizing powers, as evidenced by the proliferation of musical philanthropy. Social elites enthusiastically consumed 'high art' music, and concert-going was common throughout greater London and, to a lesser extent, in the provinces. Music historian Ruth Solie has in fact observed that the Victorian public offered 'the most welcoming and the most lucrative market that continental musicians found anywhere, and in terms of interest and participation there was no more vital culture in Europe'.<sup>22</sup> Moving from concert hall to drawing room, middle and upper-class women all possessed a full musical education. These women were accustomed to singing or playing the piano for their family's amusement.

But judging from its relationship to English national identity and its status among men, music was less healthy. While middle class men eagerly encouraged music-making among their wives and daughters, and flocked to see foreign artists in public, there was a curious sense that they themselves were not 'musical' people. Music was almost entirely absent from elite male education, and gentlemen who practiced it met with significant suspicion. Walter Parratt summed up the curious position in an 1887 retrospective: 'Notwithstanding these signs of vigorous musical life, it cannot be said that music was flourishing in this country'<sup>23</sup>

As Richard Leppert has noted, Victorian men's detachment from musical practice had clear eighteenth century precedents. The Earl of Chesterfield's injunction that playing musical instruments put a gentleman 'in an very frivolous, contemptible light' are well known.<sup>24</sup> Yet in the Georgian period, this was far from the dominant view. In fact, it was only by the early Victorian era that Chesterfield's mistrust of musical endeavour started to intensify. Music was cast as un-English. The fact that professional players were primarily by French or especially Italian immigrants made it easy to cast the artform as a foreign, Catholic pursuit. As Frederick J Crowest wrote in 1881, 'we are not essentially a musical people, as are, for instance, the Italians: musicians do not spring up on English soil nearly so rapidly as do capitalists, clergymen, shopkeepers and mechanics'.<sup>25</sup> The idea that the English were constitutionally poor musicians was in

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<sup>22</sup> Ruth Solie, 'Music', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, ed. Francis O'Gorman (2010), p. 102.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Parratt, 'Music', in *The Reign of Queen Victoria: A Survey of Fifty Years of Progress*, ed. Thomas Humphry Ward (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1887): 609.

<sup>24</sup> Earl of Chesterfield, cited in Richard Leppert, *Music and Image: domesticity, ideology, and socio-cultural formation in eighteenth century England* (1993): 21.

<sup>25</sup> Frederick J. Crowest, *Phases of Musical England*, cited in Gatens, *Cathedral Music*, p. 18.

fact so strong that native players commonly marketed themselves as ‘Herr’, ‘Signor’, or ‘Mme’, rather than ‘Mr.’ or ‘Mrs.’<sup>26</sup> Music was a foreign pursuit.

In a related prejudice, music was also cast as ‘unmanly’. According to John Antes Latrobe in 1831, the piano ‘is shunned by almost every one, who desires to preserve his character from a charge of effeminacy’.<sup>27</sup> Charles Hallé remarked upon coming to London in the 1840s, that if he asked a gentleman whether he played an instrument, ‘it was considered an insult’.<sup>28</sup> Looking back in 1902, John Fuller Maitland reminisced that the average (read, middle class) English parent during the nineteenth century

considered it an almost unmentionable disgrace that a taste for music should manifest itself in the case of the male children...a son who should take to singing or to ‘wasting his time’ at the piano was held to be a sort of disgrace to any respectable family, and to require some grave treatment, medical or other, for his cure.<sup>29</sup>

Musicologists still debate the reasons why music became so strongly associated with effeminate foreigners during the nineteenth century. The *Musical Standard*, writing in 1902, attributed the phenomenon to Britain’s national devotion to commerce, politics, and outdoor sports.<sup>30</sup> More recently, historian of church music William Gatens has raised the dual impact of Enlightened rationalist thought, which disparaged music’s limited representational powers, and evangelical ‘neo-Puritanism’, which blurred and expanded certain seventeenth century strictures against music in church into a broader philistinism. Together, these led to a conviction that music was

morally questionable, effete, and enervating, a squandering of energy that could better be expended in worthier directions, at best an innocuous and trivial pastime not to be taken seriously, and hence fundamentally at odds with religious devotion if not kept within severe bounds.<sup>31</sup>

Nicholas Temperley has questioned Gatens’s accusation of ‘philistinism’, arguing that such an attitude would have censured foreign as much as native musical activities. Clearly, this was not the case, for Italian signors achieved great celebrity on London’s concert circuit. Temperley instead attributes the dearth of homegrown musicians to a general disbelief in England’s musical talents. This, he argues, was enforced by a

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Music and Manliness’, *MSt* 18:450 (1902): 102.

<sup>27</sup> John Antes Latrobe, *Music of the Church*, p. 403.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Hallé, cited in ‘The Sexual Politics of Victorian Musical Aesthetics’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 119:1 (1994): 93.

<sup>29</sup> John Fuller Maitland, *Music in the XIXth Century* (London: 1902), p. 127.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Music and Manliness: An American View of us’, *MSt* (1902).

<sup>31</sup> Gatens, *Victorian Cathedral Practice*, pp. 20-22.

widespread mania for patronising foreign artists, a means of asserting social position since the early eighteenth century.<sup>32</sup>

In a provocative argument, Phyllis Weliver meanwhile suggests that the English musical renunciation was in fact imperialism by another name:

While cultural imperialism generally means to assert the cultural production of one nation over that of another, in Victorian Britain a different type of imperialism was asserted through music. The means of differentiating between 'us' and 'them' lay in those who produced music.<sup>33</sup>

Music, Weliver argues, was a tool of imperialism, English male elites asserted power though encouraging others – in Weliver's argument, foreigners – to play for them while they watched from their position of power.

Weliver does not fully tease out the erotic element implications of this argument. If consuming music was an act of asserting dominance, it seems clear to me that this held sexual undertones. This was especially the case given that, as observed in the previous chapter, during the Victorian period musical performance was commonly understood as an act of corporeal display. In a culture that devalued body in favour of mind and 'rationality', such a show was considered beneath middle class gentleman. But from a woman or foreigner, it could be a source of embodied, sensual pleasure. Implicitly or explicitly, elite consumers of music asserted social dominance by sexualising performers' display. This applied as much to wives in the drawing room as it did to Italian opera singers. One might again remember Adam Smith's censure that performing music was 'a sort of public prostitution'.<sup>34</sup>

Thus elite male fears of musical performance were also governed by the fear of becoming sexual objects, and all the moral degeneracy that would imply. These concerns remained strong by the 1880s. In 1889, a correspondent to the *Musical Standard* determined that 'the practice and study of music does and must necessarily unfit a man for some of the rougher experiences of life which might tend to make a man firm and brave'.<sup>35</sup> The same year, the *Musical Times* observed that there remained

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Temperley, 'Xenophilia in British Musical History', in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*, 1, ed. Bennett Zon (1999): 3-19.

<sup>33</sup> Phyllis Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860-1900: representations of music, science, and gender in the leisured home* (2000), pp. 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Available online at <<http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWN.html>> [accessed 29/09/14]. For more detail, see Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (1993)

<sup>35</sup> 'Manly Musicians', *MSt* 37:1308 (1889): 157.

many excellent people with whom the term “artist” is simply a synonym for “black sheep”. They are so firmly persuaded that exclusive devotion to the study of music is inevitably attended by a weakening of moral and physical fibre that they avoid all personal contact or association with such persons. In some cases that we know of this feeling amounts to a positive repugnance or resentment.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore accusations that choirs turned churches into ‘concert halls’ had a double barb. For one, the charge attacked choirs for silencing congregational participation. But by associating choir music with art music more generally, the image of ‘concert halls’ also invoked wider anxieties regarding artistic display. By 1889, music was still seen as feminine, foreign, and Roman. Performance was sexualized and degrading. The pleasure of consumption may have been appropriate in concert halls or drawing rooms, but it most certainly was not appropriate within that fount of English middle class identity: the Anglican Church.

### **Response: Boy Trebles**

Given the risks that choir music could be associated with ‘concert hall’ music, how could church musicians ensure that the form was taken seriously as a legitimate adjunct to Christian worship? Choirmasters attempted to solve this problem by emphasising choral music’s distinctiveness from other forms of musical activity. They did so both rhetorically and musically. In music criticism, Anglican musicians purposefully appropriated the language of ‘effeminacy’ – a language that they themselves feared – to distance choir music from other genres. By casting secular sounds as weak and feminine and sacred music as strong and manly, choirmasters attempted to beat British philistinism at its own game. At the same time, choirmasters crafted a distinct musical sound that set Church singing apart from any other kind of nineteenth-century music. In short, church musicians effectively attempted to secure legitimacy for choral singing by denying that it was ‘music’, as generally understood in nineteenth century society.

From the start of their movement, Tractarian choral revivalists had developed strict standards for appropriate choral composition. In October 1853, *The Ecclesiologist* stated that the most suitable anthems for Anglican services were by composers who wrote before the mid-seventeenth century, notably Tallis, Farrant, and Batten.<sup>37</sup> This repertoire sounded markedly different to dominant nineteenth century concert and operatic styles. Emphasising it constructed a church sound that had, in the words of

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Manliness in Music’, *MT* 30:558 (1889): 460.

<sup>37</sup> Adelman, *Cambridge Ecclesiologists*, p. 77.



Robert Druitt, 'no affinity with the secular or theatrical music of the day.' This was a deliberate choice. Tractarian musician John Jebb deplored the use of 'operatic' styles in Church as 'an abominable perversion of sacred things...a custom so essentially popish in its spirit'.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Edward Young, in a satire of the early music reform movement, joked that 'the language...that is not everywhere sober, self restrained, and abstinent of all excitement of what are called the "animal spirits" cannot properly be called a sacred language'.<sup>39</sup>

These attempts to set sacred music apart from secular continued into the late nineteenth century. At the 1881 Church Congress in Newcastle, professor of music W. H. Monk defined church music as follows:

The maintenance of a musical service, the material of which and its execution are as unlike what is heard outside the church as possible; so that you can say of it at once, 'This is Church music', as you can happily say of many churches 'This looks like the House of God'.<sup>40</sup>

An anonymous writer to the *Musical Times* in 1889 likewise emphasised church music's distance from secular styles:

What is Church Music? As briefly and clearly as possible let me hazard a definition. Surely it is a combination of just, pure, dignified, beautiful, and artistic sounds, regulated by a distinct, solemn, chaste, and well-marked rhythm. Such a definition will exclude rigidly all common, secular, base music; all trivial, songy, light melodies of the ballad and love ditty character.<sup>41</sup>

Thus in his 1902 retrospective on music in England, Maitland observed that:

Until quite late in the nineteenth century the music of the English Church was a thing by itself; the anthem was a form distinctively and characteristically English...there was a purely English tradition in regard to Church compositions which was maintained by a small number of men who, outside the sphere of sacred music, produced little or nothing.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> John Jebb, cited in Gatens, *Victorian Cathedral Music*, p. 61.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Young, cited in Grant Olwage, 'Hym(n)ing: Music and Masculinity in the Early Victorian Church' in *Nineteenth Century British Music Studies* 3, ed. Peter Horton and Bennett Zon (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2003), 29.

<sup>40</sup> *The Official Report of the Church of the Church Congress Held at Newcastle-on-Tyne*, (London, 1882), p. 331. Available online at < <https://archive.org/details/reportofprocee1881churuoft> > [accessed 29/09/14].

<sup>41</sup> 'Church Music', *MW* 69:28 (1889): 451-452.

<sup>42</sup> Maitland, *Music in the XIXth Century*, p. 77.

Besides aiming to create a distinctive Anglican sound, church musicians put great rhetorical effort into emphasising choir music's cultural legitimacy. This meant establishing it as 'masculine' – as opposed to effeminate secular sounds. In an 1865 article entitled *Manhood in Church Music*, an anonymous writer to *The Orchestra* praised the sacred music of Palestrina, Bull, Bach and Handel as revealing 'the true types of manhood'.<sup>43</sup> An 1888 article published in the *Musical World* stated that church music sought to offer 'in heartiest and manliest of styles, songs of praise to Him who is all worthy!'<sup>44</sup> In a retrospective on the century published in 1897, Joseph Bennett praised the 'fine common sense, manly respect for tradition, and the avoidance of sensationalism' that English church music had displayed over the century.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore by 1889, whether resulting from external criticisms of choirs or from their own disdain for 'secular' music, choirmasters were making a conscious effort to present choir music as its own distinctive genre – a masculine genre.

A close reading of the 'Angelic Quire' debate suggests that boy trebles became central to this endeavour. For one thing, the boys' maleness helped to reinforce the rhetoric of 'manliness' that had grown up around church music. Yet the actual *sound* of boys' voices was also important. Trebles possessed a distinctive timbre, which we still recognise and celebrate today. This was, in the words of one correspondent, 'pure, fresh, simple, and, perhaps, cold'.<sup>46</sup> It is evident from the *Daily Telegraph* letters that striking sound of boy singers was a potent means of placing choir singing outside mainstream Victorian musical activity.

It should of course be noted that one cannot assume that either boy or women singers sounded in 1889 as they do today. Aside from differences – probably considerable – in vocal education and conditioning, there are physiological factors to consider. For one, nearly all middle class women at this time wore corsets on a daily basis throughout their lives. Given that this led to widespread deformities of the ribcage, redistribution of internal organs, and decreased lung capacity, it likely also altered vocal production.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> 'Manhood in Church Music', *The Orchestra* 3:69 (1865): 265.

<sup>44</sup> 'Purpose in Church Music', *MW* 68:46 (1888): 906-907.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Bennett, 'Victorian Music', *MT* 38:225 (1897): 650.

<sup>46</sup> Chas J. Capponi (6) The persistence of this way of thinking about boys' voices is exemplified in Timothy Day's 'English Cathedral Choirs in the Twentieth Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*, ed. John Potter (2011), p. 123: 'Again and again throughout the century the same epithets have been used to characterise the singing, "pure", "otherworldly", "ethereal", "impersonal"'.  
<sup>47</sup> For further detail, see Paige V. Banaji, 'Womanly Eloquence and Rhetorical Bodies: regendering the public speaker through physical culture', in *Rhetoric, History, and Women's Oratorical Education: American women learn to speak*, ed. David Gold and Catherine L. Hobbs (2013): 154-176. By 1920, a singing teacher observed that 'In these days of splendidly free clothing for women, and active exercises for the young of both sexes, most healthy boys and girls will be

Meanwhile, working class boys, who made up most paid choristers, would likely have been undernourished.

Yet while both parties' voices have likely changed since 1889, it is well established that the bodies of adult females possess very different physiological equipment to those of children (of either sex). In 1889, as today, there was a clear contrast in vocal timbre between boys and women. Thus when correspondents described boys' voices as 'pure' and 'distinctive', they referenced genuine sonoral, and therefore aesthetic, differences.

Significantly, the unique sound of boy trebles was associated with very few contexts other than Church music. With a few notable exceptions - which appear to have been popular precisely *because* they were notable exceptions - child singers were absent from concert rooms and opera houses.<sup>48</sup> Due to the sense that music was 'unmanly', male children were also largely discouraged from domestic music-making. By contrast, women's voices could be heard throughout nineteenth century music. It had by this point been several centuries since female singers had cemented a presence in the concert room and opera house stages. Female voices were likewise a common sound in drawing rooms, for which purposes all elite daughters would have received at least a rudimentary vocal education. The sound of boy trebles thus helped mark church music as a categorically different genre to any and all forms of secular music.

Female voices were cast as immutably and damningly secular; boys' voices as the necessary raw materials of a sacred sound. Musical education was a crucial source of this difference. Middle class women were trained in non-religious, 'drawing room' singing as part of their upbringing. By contrast, responsibility for boys' vocal education fell principally on their choirmasters, who enjoyed a free reign in overseeing the trebles' vocal development. Thus pioneering Tractarian reformer Frederick Oakley, when selecting boys for his choir in Margaret Chapel, Marylebone, had made a point of choosing those with little experience in singing: 'to speak generally, the fewer previous ideas of music they bring to the task, always supposing a natural taste for it, the better'.<sup>49</sup>

It is clear from the *Telegraph* correspondence that Oakley's 1889 counterparts likewise appreciated the blank canvas boys provided. 'Boys,' wrote correspondent M. Kingston,

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found to breathe amply and correctly....girls do not as a rule raise the shoulders and assume the aspect of pouter pigeons, as used frequently to be the case in the bad old days of tight corsets and small waists for women'. G.G., 'The Art of Teaching Singing', *MT* 61:934 (1920): 819.

<sup>48</sup> Notable exceptions are detailed in Marah Gubar, 'The Cult of the Child and the Controversy over Child Actors', in Marah Gubar, *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (2009), pp. 149-179.

<sup>49</sup> Frederick Oakley, cited in Rainbow, *Choral Revival*, p. 19.

‘may (with skill and a knowledge of their peculiarities) be trained to almost anything.’ Arnold Russell agreed: ‘as a teacher of singing, I venture to submit that in by far the great majority of cases it will be found that boys’ voices may be developed in a way that makes them infinitely better for church purposes’.<sup>50</sup>

Due both to women’s physiological maturity and to their prior training, adult female voices were less malleable. For correspondent ‘A Conservative Vicar’, using female singers risked submerging the congregation in ‘a flood of over-refined vocalisation’.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, Arthur Edwards claimed:

I contend the plain fact is that, for purposes of Church music, it is possible to train boys to do anything with it, but not so with women. If one or two of the latter possess voices above the ordinary quality, and have gained all their musical skill from different sources, it is almost absolutely certain those voices will stand out from the others because of different modes of production, and that the singers will each want the chief place as soloist or leader; but let us have a dozen or fifteen lads with good voices, judiciously selected to blend, and we can train them to do their work with the fullest spirit of obedience and emulation.<sup>52</sup>

George Vernon Brown agreed:

Looking at the matter purely on musical lines a conductor’s task is no easy one, for he has to grapple with the mannerisms so common to amateur female singers, the most objectionable being the frequent introduction of the slur and the appoggiatura, giving the singing a style which might be termed ‘gushing’.<sup>53</sup>

The sound of women’s voices had been developed in secular settings for secular purposes. For church musicians anxious to differentiate the church from the concert hall, this was a fatal flaw.

The spectre of the concert room thus loomed large in ‘Angelic Quire’ descriptions of women’s voices. ‘Unfortunately the ladies’ singing always seems to suggest the concert room’, wrote Chas. J. Capponi.<sup>54</sup> ‘A Conservative Vicar’ agreed: ‘what the average class of worshippers requires is not an artistic feast, or quasi-secular “concert”’.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, correspondent ‘A.D’ stated that he greatly preferred the sound of a boy treble singing Mendelssohn’s ‘Hear my prayer’ to that of famous concert soprano Emma Albani,

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<sup>50</sup> Arnold Russell, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 15 Aug 1889; M. Kingston, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 21 Aug 1889.

<sup>51</sup> A Conservative Vicar, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 15 Aug 1889.

<sup>52</sup> Arthur Edwards, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

<sup>53</sup> George Vernon Brown, *DT* 19 Aug 1889.

<sup>54</sup> Chas. J. Capponi, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 20 Aug 1889.

<sup>55</sup> A Conservative Vicar, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 15 Aug 1889

‘much as I admire her singing in other kinds of music’.<sup>56</sup> ‘A Late Vicar Choral’ likewise criticised the ‘more mature if less unsophisticated women. We may tolerate conceit in the concert room, but in the House of God it is marvellously ill-placed.’<sup>57</sup> In general, women’s voices were agreed to be ‘quite out of their element’.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast, the existing physiological distinctiveness of boys’ voices could be further manipulated to create a unique choral voice. Correspondents emphasised boy treble voices’ suitability to sacred settings. ‘It can scarcely be questioned that the “purity” of boys’ voices is much more appropriate to a religious service’, declared one correspondent. ‘Boys’ voices’, wrote another, ‘are (as was very long ago discovered) far more suitable for the purposes than ladies’. According to a third, ‘the tone of a boy chorister’s voice has a peculiar fittingness for devotional music which that of a female soprano does not possess except in very rare instances’.<sup>59</sup> The treble voice was not only free from troublesome concert hall connotations, but also inchoate and therefore an appropriate material from which to craft a novel and distinctive sound.

In the nineteenth century, boys had – as they do today – weaker technical capacity than women. Supporters of boy treble voices did not typically dispute this fact. A very small number made ill-advised attempts to argue that women were less competent musicians. One correspondent argued that only boys could reach high (soprano) C; another baldly asserted that ‘very few women can sing in tune’.<sup>60</sup>

More frequently, however, supporters of boys’ voices instead claimed that boys’ voices, while not exactly superior, were perfectly sufficient for – and perfectly suited to – sacred music. As the correspondent ‘Ex-Chorister’ wrote, ‘the compass of a chorister’s voice, properly produced and developed, is entirely adequate for ordinary church music’.<sup>61</sup> One senses that he recognised that boy choristers were less competent singers, but that this did not concern him. In some strange ways it may even have been an advantage. In the same sense that, according to Maitland, a middle class man could take pride ‘in the confession that he does not know one tune from another’ – and in the same sense that supporters of congregational singing praised parishioners’ mishmash of voices – assertions that ‘ordinary church music’ was all that was required may have

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<sup>56</sup> A.D., ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 21 Aug 1889.

<sup>57</sup> A Late Vicar-Choral, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 21 Aug 1889. ‘Less unsophisticated’ is not a compliment. Throughout the nineteenth century ‘sophistication’ had strong overtones of dishonesty and falsification. Thus ‘her theatrical vein is not that of a rich, natural product. It is forced, pampered, sophisticated’. ‘Theatrical Examiner’, *The Examiner* 1459 (17 Jan 1836): 37.

<sup>58</sup> A.D., ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT*, 17 Aug 1889.

<sup>59</sup> A Conservative Vicar ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 15 Aug 1889; Arnold Russell, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 17 Aug 1889; George Vernon Brown, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 21 Aug 1889.

<sup>60</sup> City Organist, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 17 Aug 1889; John Place, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 21 Aug 1889.

<sup>61</sup> Ex-Chorister, ‘Angelic Quire’, *DT* 23 Aug 1889.

been a further means of emphasising the genre's distinction from 'artistic' musical endeavour – and all the pernicious, effeminate associations that entailed.<sup>62</sup>

As noted, the term 'pure' appeared repeatedly throughout the *Telegraph* correspondence in relation to boys' voices. That word, more than any other, encapsulated the musical attractions of the boy treble voice. For besides from the word's obvious associations with sexual chastity, 'pure' signalled purity in genre. Boys' voices, unlike women's, could perform 'pure', 'true' church music. Their sound was untarnished by association with the pernicious secular musics that existed elsewhere in Victorian society. At a time when choirs and choir music faced criticism both from within and from outside the church, the distinctiveness of boys' voices offered a means legitimising choirs as part of Anglican worship. The strong attachment visible in certain circles to the boy treble – in the 'Angelic Quire' correspondence, before it, and indeed beyond it – was as much an assertion of genre as a prejudice of gender.

### **The sacred/secular division blurs**

Yet while some choirmasters clearly put a great deal of effort into distancing church music from 'secular' styles, other church musicians embraced mainstream musical culture. Indeed, one of the very reasons why church music 'purists' were so keen to establish choir music's distinctiveness was that elsewhere in society, the separation between 'sacred' and 'secular' was beginning to blur. Accusations of 'ostentation' and of 'concert rooms' may have been phrased in inflammatory language, but they identified a very real phenomenon. The late nineteenth century saw 'manly' church services of boys singing Tallis, but it also saw services of elaborate, expressive, and so-called 'secular' styles of Anglican music.

In certain subsections of middle class culture, music was slowly gaining a new respectability. Of course, the anxieties examined in the previous section were powerful. Yet part of the reason why they were so pronounced during the 1880s was that, in certain pockets of bourgeois culture, there had developed a new interest in music as a serious and even professional pursuit. This renewed interest was accompanied by a flowering of musical activity among elite gentlemen.

Contemporary observers recognized the change. An 1889 *Musical Times* article announced that accusations of 'unmanliness' towards musicians were 'waning', though they were 'not yet by any means extinct'.<sup>63</sup> By 1896, *The Musical Standard* stated that

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<sup>62</sup> Maitland, *Music in the XIXth Century*, p. 128.

<sup>63</sup> 'Manliness in Music', 460.

the prejudice against male musicians was ‘not as much so as it was a generation ago’, though it did add that even then, ‘when we mention music and manhood, too often it produces an impression akin to the mention of millinery and manhood, or dress-making and manhood’.<sup>64</sup>

The professional musician could now be English – and masculine. At an institutional level, this development was evident in the establishment of several major organisations for the development of native English musical talent, notably the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (1880), the Crystal Palace School of Music (1880), and the Royal College of Music (1882). There was a simultaneous explosion of new music periodicals, which helped in fostering a broader musical public: *The Musical Opinion* (1880), *The Lute* (1883), *The Magazine of Music* (1884), *The Quarterly Musical Review* (1885), and several others.<sup>65</sup> One might also point to the emergence of celebrated English composers, notably Parry, Stanford, Sullivan, Mackenzie, and Elgar, as evidence of changed attitudes. That English men were now aspiring to compose music showed that there was a new openness to the art form in elite English culture.

Growing enthusiasm for musical activities extended to amateurs; there was a great expansion of amateur music-making during the late nineteenth century. Particularly significant for the development of church music was the amateur choral movement. This saw a particularly spectacular development over the last few decades of the nineteenth century.

From the 1860s, choirs spread throughout England in a great variety of forms – attached to civic institutions, to educational establishments, to political movements such as Temperance and Social Purity, or to stand-alone associations and societies. Amateur choral festivals and, from the 1880s, competitions emerged to further the movement. These developments had roots in the philanthropic working-class initiatives of mid-century. However, historian Dave Russell has shown that by the late nineteenth century the craze saw significant middle-class participation, becoming a movement in which ‘working, lower middle, and upper middle classes all made substantial contributions’.<sup>66</sup> Choir membership was a sign of respectability.<sup>67</sup> By modern

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Music and Manhood’, *MSt* 6:137 (1896): 87.

<sup>65</sup> The period 1880-1893 saw the establishment of no less than nine new musical periodicals: *The Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review* (Oct 1880-Sep 1906); *The Lute* (Jan 1883-Dec 1899); *The Magazine of Music* (Mar 1884- Mar 1897); *The Quarterly Musical Review* (1885-1888); *The Church Musician* (Jan 1891-Dec 1895); *Musical News* (Mar 1891-Dec 1900); *The School Music Review* (1892-1930); *New Quarterly Musical Review* (1893-1896); and *The Minim* (Oct 1893-Jul 1902).

<sup>66</sup> Russell, *Popular Music in England*, pp.252-3.

standards, the size of these groups and the extent of their enthusiasm are striking. Oratorio choirs of up to 450 singers - and frequently between 250 and 300 - were common in the north of England.<sup>68</sup> In 1888, the *Saturday Review* noted with pleasure

the progress of choral singing amongst all classes, which is an undeniable fact. Compare the Handel Festival of this year with the first that took place some thirty years ago. Then it was absolutely necessary to employ a large number of paid professionals; this year the chorus was almost entirely amateur.<sup>69</sup>

Given that the festival choir in question consisted of 800 each of sopranos, altos, and basses and 750 tenors, this was some considerable feat.

As concert music became more respectable, concert hall performance styles began to appear even within the Anglican Church. The most striking example of the late nineteenth century 'Musical Renaissance's impact upon the Church was the parish church of St. Andrew's, Well's Street. For most of the late Victorian period, this parish stood under the incumbency of Benjamin Webb. In his youth, Webb had been a pivotal member of the Cambridge Ecclesiological Movement, a key engine of midcentury High Church reform. In 1863, shortly after his appointment at St Andrew's, Webb named the twenty-seven year old Joseph Barnby as organist and choirmaster.

Under Barnby's direction, services at St. Andrew's rapidly became something never before seen or heard in Anglican choral music. During the 1860s, Barnby introduced English-language adaptations of masses by Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, and Gonoud. By the end of the century, his service list ranged 'from Palestrina to Dvořák', including 'the finest sacred masterpieces of classic and modern art'.<sup>70</sup> The response from many quarters was rapturous; St. Andrew's attracted large, fashionable congregations. In 1885, the *Saturday Review* commented that 'the services in their magnificence were one of the sights of London'. *The Banner*, meanwhile, judged that under Barnby and Webb, 'the highest form of musical worship attainable within the walls of a parish church has been brought to exquisite perfection'.<sup>71</sup> Barnby's innovative adaptations of foreign mass settings soon spread to other churches, along with a number of other developments: evening and weekend organ recitals, oratorios

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<sup>67</sup> Howard E. Smither, *The History of the Oratorio, volume 4: the oratorio in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (2000), p. 276.

<sup>68</sup> Russell, *Popular Music in England*, pp. 259.

<sup>69</sup> 'Choral Singing', *SR* 66:1707 (1888): 45.

<sup>70</sup> 'St Andrew's, Wells Street', *The Organist and Choirmaster* 3:25 (1895): 19.

<sup>71</sup> Both cited in Adelman, *Cambridge Ecclesiologists*, p.113



performances, orchestral accompaniment in services.<sup>72</sup> All sought to bring more elaborate forms of music into the sacred space. Meanwhile, under Barnby's direction, congregational singing at St. Andrew's diminished until it was nearly absent.

It is easy to dismiss these developments as 'secularisation'. The key historians of Victorian church music, Bernarr Rainbow and Nicholas Temperley, both come to this conclusion. For the latter, the Barnby's innovation at St Andrew's

was in no sense a victory for the Oxford movement, or, indeed, for any idealistic group of churchmen. Rather, it was an expression of secular middle-class values and tastes, a part of the immense growth in appreciation of professional musical performance that marked the age...The popularity of continental mass music was due less to the fact that it was Roman Catholic, than the fact it was a model of religious music frankly secular and theatrical in idiom.<sup>73</sup>

Given that the middle classes were avid consumers of such 'secular and theatrical' idioms, it is easy to imagine that they would have appreciated similar styles in church. Possibly attending a church like St Andrew's would have been a status symbol. Meanwhile, the decline of congregational singing can easily be explained as an extension of bourgeois reluctance to engage in musical performance. Indeed, Tractarian reformer Robert Druitt observed a distinct embarrassment among congregational singers: the 'cold artificial tone of fashionable English society, self-wrapped, apathetic'.<sup>74</sup> Temperley's and Rainbow's arguments that the music at St. Andrew's was a response to secular tastes and desires is in many ways plausible.

Yet this narrative of secularisation and decline is problematic on several counts. For one, it is patronising to the parishioners, casting them as spiritually deaf secularists with little concern for sacred ritual. It also implies that Webb and Barnby took no role in shaping this new direction in church music, but rather bowed to the tastes of their parishioners. Finally, it takes a rather philistine view of the music itself. The manner in which Temperley sets 'secular', 'theatrical' music against the aims of 'idealistic' churchmen is strikingly resonant with the rhetoric of the High Church music purists themselves. And as was the case with these purists, the language of 'art as immoral' fails to consider the possibility that 'artistic' styles could have any spiritual merit.

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<sup>72</sup> See, for example, speech by Walter Parratt, *The Official Report of the Church Congress Held at Wakefield* (London: 1887), p. 224. Available online at <https://archive.org/details/reportofprocee1886churuoft> [accessed 29/09/14]; Walter Hillsman, 'Orchestras in Anglican Services, 1870-1901', *MT* 129:1739 (1988): 45+47-48.

<sup>73</sup> Temperley, *Parish Church Music*, p. 286.

<sup>74</sup> Druitt, cited in Olwage, 'Hym(n)ing', p. 42.

But Webb, despite being one of the founding members of the High Church movement, clearly *did* believe that modern, ‘elaborate’ music held spiritual merit – not in spite of being artistic, but *because* of it. As Dale Adelman has observed, the music fostered at St Andrew’s appealed to the old ecclesiologist’s sense that ‘nothing too good, or ornate, could be lavished on the service of God’. Webb not only encouraged Barnby’s appropriation of continental music, but also actively encouraged native English musicians. Notably he was a patron of Romantic composer Sir George Alexander Macfarren. A grateful Macfarren congratulated Webb on his ‘valuable efforts to advance Church music’.<sup>75</sup>

Webb was not alone in these efforts. At the 1872 Church Congress, John Stainer – whose own music was often (and is still) criticised for ‘theatricality’ – underlined the need to ‘compete with the aesthetics of the world’. ‘We should,’ he declared,

draw into the service of the Church, not only the most promising composers, but also painters, sculptors, and poets, should make art subservient to morality, and make all that is beautiful exemplify and inculcate all that is good.<sup>76</sup>

By the 1880s, periodicals were heralding ‘progress’ in church music. In 1886, journalist Joseph Verey wrote to the *Monthly Musical Record*:

It must be remembered that congregations are more cultivated than they were, and the same humdrum musical service that was sufficient to satisfy our forefathers is now found tiresome and inadequate. We say in the Church, ‘Let us sing to the praise and glory of God’; and surely it is time to consider whether, while we can have good music everywhere else, ought we not to praise and glorify the Creator with music more elevating to the soul, and more pleasing to the ear, than we often get at present. We do not find even the most narrow and exclusive congregations disposed to set aside music altogether. Why, then, since it is deemed a necessity of Christian worship, should it frequently be so dismal to hear?<sup>77</sup>

By the same token, forceful arguments against congregational singing, founded on religious as well as artistic principles, began to emerge. The Church, many reasoned, had a duty to offer the highest quality music possible in service of the Father. Many argued that congregational music did not reach these standards. ‘The effect of refinement which has been introduced into the singing [by] the choristers is entirely lost, or spoilt, by the cacophony which reaches my ears from the chaotic voices of the congregation’, complained one correspondent to the *Musical Standard* in 1878. ‘No

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<sup>75</sup> Adelman, *Cambridge Ecclesiologists*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>76</sup> John Stainer speaking at 1872 Leeds Church Congress. Cited in Gatens, *Victorian Cathedral Music*, p. 44.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Verey, ‘Church Music - Past and Present’, *MMR* 16:186 (1886): 124.

matter what is the sentiment of the words uttered...the congregation continues to sing *ff*, usually a note or two behind the choir'.<sup>78</sup> Composer Stanley Hawley echoed these concerns in an article in the *Magazine of Music* in 1896. A well-trained choir, Hawley claimed, 'singing both chants and hymns, will do hearts more good than the uplifting of uncertain, untuneful (some bellowing, some piercingly shrill) voices will to either the possessor of the voice or his immediate neighbour'. Congregational singing was, in his view, 'a stage in Church music which, in the growth of an art which is daily expanding in every direction, must be passed over as *an early stage*'.<sup>79</sup>

Musicians and churchmen who saw congregational singing as inimical to worship argued that choirs were better able than parishioners to express religious sentiments in music. As Hugh Reginald Haweis at St. James' - himself known for elaborate musical services at St James's, Marylebone - noted in his 1871 work *Music and Morals*, 'the strength of the congregation during the anthem is emphatically to sit, or at all events to stand, still. They need lose nothing by their silence, for, rightly understood, it may be quite as blessed a thing to allow music to flow into the soul as to pour forth actively songs of praise.'<sup>80</sup>

Therefore during the later nineteenth century, alongside the austere, congregationally-orientated church choir fostered by High Church conservatives, there had also developed a more musically elaborate, artistically-minded choir model. Although the artistic choir was cast as 'secular' both by its opponents and by later historians, its contemporary proponents in fact defended it on religious grounds: that God could best be praised using the most beautiful art available. Hardly a niche idea, artistic choirs received support across the Anglican Church, from High Churchmen such as Webb, to the broadest of broad churchmen, such as Stainer and Haweis.

## The Benefit of Women's Voices

Many advocates for more elaborate choral services were satisfied with male singers. Webb's choir at St. Andrew's, consisting of thirty-two boy trebles, was a clear example. Yet the 'Angelic Quire' correspondence includes many complaints that children's voices were unable to do justice to more technically and artistically challenging styles of Anglican music. For many, the limited physical capacities and relative inexperience of boy choristers proved frustrating.

<sup>78</sup> H.B., 'Congregational Singing', *MSt* 15:738 (1878): 185.

<sup>79</sup> Stanley Hawley, 'Round Table: Should the Music of the Church be Congregational', *The Magazine of Music* 13:9 (1896): 589-590.

<sup>80</sup> Hugh Reginald Haweis, *Music and Morals* (1871). 1889 edition available online at <<https://archive.org/details/musicmorals01haweis>> [accessed 29/09/14].

'To tell the truth', complained one 'Angelic Quire' correspondent, '[boys'] delivery of sacred words sometimes shocks the sensitive ear, while their vocal displays are often painfully discordant'.<sup>81</sup> Correspondent Charles McLeod Carey agreed: 'the average choirboy's harsh-loudness is not musically sonorous; neither is his obtuseness to articulation a penetrating power': trebles were 'crude material'.<sup>82</sup> M. Kingston accused boys of singing 'parrot-like', arguing that 'you cannot get the boys to feel the music they are singing, and to know the depths of expression for a complete rendition'.<sup>83</sup>

To argue that women would be artistically preferable to these boys, commentators pointed out the success of female sopranos in secular choral societies and associations. By the late nineteenth century, the benefits of using female voices in these spaces had become clear. Dave Russell has demonstrated that by the later nineteenth century, female sopranos were 'fully established' in amateur choirs, made necessary by increasingly ambitious musical standards. In 1837, eight of the 54 members of Huddersfield Choral Society were women; by 1895, women were 187 out of 330. Significantly, much of these organisations' repertoire was initially sacred; there existed a limited number of secular choral works when the movement began. Thus in addition to demonstrating the artistic potential of mixed choruses, amateur choirs showed how sacred music sung by female voices could sound.<sup>84</sup>

Looking to these examples, a prominent group of writers in the *Telegraph* debate praised female singers for their technical competence and musical expression. For Charles McLeod Carey, 'the difference in quality and refinement' of female voices was 'patent to all'.<sup>85</sup> Anita Austin agreed, claiming that one need only give female singers 'half the training of choir boys, and the results will be more agreeable and lasting'. Correspondent M. Kingston 'emphatically' argued 'that the greater success musically is attained by the mixed choir with ladies' voices'. Women, he claimed 'are easier to train, have a deeper fund of expression, and with skill and tact on the part of the choirmaster can sing music of any degree of difficulty with a more solid and brilliant effect. From an elaborate Handel chorus to a simple little chant tone the ladies' voices have the advantage'.<sup>86</sup>

Others emphasised the necessity of female singers for more challenging repertoire. According to Thomas Mills,

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<sup>81</sup> Churchman, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 16 Aug 1889.

<sup>82</sup> Charles McLeod Carey, 'Angelic Quire' *DT* 27 Aug 1889.

<sup>83</sup> M Kingston, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 21 Aug 1889.

<sup>84</sup> Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England*, pp. 259-60

<sup>85</sup> Charles McLeod Carey, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 27 Aug 1889.

<sup>86</sup> M Kingston, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 21 Aug 1889.

in such pieces as 'for unto us a child is born' (Messiah), 'the heavens are telling' (Creation), 'but as for his people' (Israel in Egypt), and almost all oratorio choruses, boys' voices are found wanting. In my opinion many of the great composers never reckoned on boy singers to do justice to their compositions.

If the total exclusion of lady and the total admission of boy singers become universally acknowledged, then adieu to the labours of Haydn, Spohr, Bach, Mendelssohn, Mozart, and, above all, Handel, leaving out of consideration many of our modern composers. The idea of excluding lady singers from the production of such choruses as those I have referred to would be not only absurd but nothing short of a complete negation of their spirit and beauty.<sup>87</sup>

A further correspondent similarly argued that without women in the choir, 'the works of the great composers of modern times are discarded because they are unsuitable to boys'. He noted that the all-male choir of St. Mary's Church, Highgate, despite possessing a talented conductor, 'cannot at a great festival perform with success any one of the great masses, as the boys' voices are not sufficiently high in register to execute the part originally written for women'. 'Has not the musical art itself suffered?' he asked, in the face of this.<sup>88</sup> Another correspondent, meanwhile, argued that there existed 'a score of splendid masses and choral services which cannot be sung by boys for want of compass and power, but which female sopranos and contraltos could recall from oblivion with endless delight and profit'.<sup>89</sup>

Associations between female voices and secular spaces may have been problematic for High Church conservatives. But for those with more progressive taste, they were something of an attraction. Many supporters of female voices argued that woman's prevalence outside of church music was an endorsement of their competence. Was there a 'better proof' of women's musical abilities, asked Edward Baugh, 'than their indispensable existence in our leading choral societies?'<sup>90</sup> For Charles J. Bishenden mixed choirs would be able to secure 'good solo singers' (presumably professionals): 'female voices are engaged to sing at oratorio concerts, and why not in churches?'<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, a further correspondent asked, 'If these sweet little boys are all that some would have us to believe, why do we not make use of them in the concert room?' –

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<sup>87</sup> Thomas Mills 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 24 Aug 1889.

<sup>88</sup> Churchman, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 16 Aug 1889.

<sup>89</sup> Indicus, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

<sup>90</sup> Edward Baugh, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 23 Aug 1889.

<sup>91</sup> Chas. J. Bishenden, 'Angelic Quire', *DT* 15 Aug 1889.

accidentally or deliberately missing the fact that it was boys' very *absence* from this space that, for others, formed their attraction.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

Debates over genre were thus central to the 'Angelic Quire' debate. This was not simply a discussion over womanhood, but over the form and functions of sacred music. This debate, in turn, touched on issues across nineteenth century society – from class culture, to musical aesthetics, to the issue of what counted as 'sacred' in Victorian culture.

Advocates of boy choristers supported trebles not simply because they were male, but because their voices were unlike any other in nineteenth century musical culture. At a time when church musicians often feared association with secular, 'concert hall' styles, boy trebles provided the tools to craft a distinctive Anglican sound.

Meanwhile, support for female choristers came as much from a revision of sacred music as it did from a revision of women's sphere. Advocates emphasized the need to secure women's 'expressive', technically competent voices to produce music of the highest possible artistic standard. Both sides believed that the sound they advocated was the sound most appropriate to the sacred task of worship. The boy chorister could prevent worship from being profaned by secular passions; the woman chorister could make music of a calibre befitting the divine Creator.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the 'Angelic Quire' controversy was not simply a debate between gender-progressive supporters of female choristers and their gender-conservative opponents. Both sides were influenced by the ways in which the concept of womanhood was evolving in nineteenth century society. But as this chapter has shown, gender roles were not the only major cultural touchstone at stake in the debate. The 'Angelic Quire' discussion equally concerned changing concepts of music, both sacred and secular. As *Telegraph* correspondents debated the women, church choirs, and 'surplices', they were, wittingly or unwittingly, commenting on broader nineteenth century controversies – controversies not only about gender roles, but also about music, Anglican worship, and their intersection.

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<sup>92</sup> C. R. M., 'Angelic Quire' *DT* 17 Aug 1889.

## Conclusion

In 1886, the *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle* joked that the history of women in church choirs would ‘one day form the subject of an interesting and entertaining volume’. As a historian, it is unusual and rather pleasing to receive explicit endorsement from one’s subjects of study. I hope, though, that this thesis has gone beyond the *Huddersfield’s* expectations. For the history of women in church choirs is more than simply amusing: it is important.

This might not seem to be the case. At first glance, the subject can appear rather niche. It certainly did in 1889, three years after the *Chronicle’s* predictions. As observed in Chapter Two, the ‘Angelic Quire’ controversy was commonly dismissed as a ‘gooseberry season’ oddity, another mindless filler until the news cycle restarted in September. Many of the debate’s contemporaries clearly did not take it seriously.

Yet while the correspondence may have appeared narrow and frivolous, it in fact invoked a broad spread of tensions that cut to the core of late Victorian cultural politics: questions of religious iconography, gender politics, and class warfare. This debate concerned denominational rivalry, the purposes of church music, and the status of music in British society.

Therefore the ‘Angelic Quire’ discussion was deceptively complex and wide-ranging, coloured by a range of extremely divisive areas of late Victorian culture. It was as viciously political as any of its contemporary debates – from arguments over the voting franchise to debates over imperial decline or Irish home rule.

Arguably, the ‘Angelic Quire’ correspondence became so broad and so political not in spite of its seeming pettiness, but *because* of it. Over the past two chapters, we have seen that ostensibly apolitical questions, concerning topics such as visual or musical aesthetics, could provoke unintentionally revealing responses. Correspondents may not have realized, and certainly did not fully articulate, the cultural agendas that lay behind statements such as ‘boys’ voices are purer’ or ‘women can’t wear surplices’. Yet the implications of these claims were considerable – and all the more honest for having emerged unintentionally. ‘Aesthetic’ concerns over female choristers’ attire masked deep-seated objections to the prospect of women singing in public. Meanwhile, comments that female choristers would turn choir stalls into ‘concert rooms’ went beyond genre: they were loaded with fears of secular music and the foreign, sexual passions it could excite.

Besides the insights the ‘Angelic Quire’ discussion provides into late nineteenth century culture, however, the debate also has broader historiographical significance. This thesis began by noting the narratives of absence that continue to dominate modern histories of women in sacred music. Across both popular and academic circles, it remains widely assumed that the Anglican choral tradition was entirely male until the late twentieth century. The ‘Angelic Quire’ correspondence forces us to reconsider this received wisdom.

The debate prompts revision in several ways. Most obviously, it offers irrefutable evidence of female involvement in sacred music in 1889 – a century earlier than many accounts would have it. Placed alongside the broad spread of eighteenth and nineteenth century evidence for woman church singers considered in Chapter One, it is clear from this correspondence that female choristers were present long before common narratives claim.

But as well as challenging the timing of exclusion narratives, the ‘Angelic Quire’ correspondence also challenges their shape. Implicit in accounts of women’s absence from sacred music has been a Whiggish history of social progress, as if to say, ‘past misogyny kept women out of church music, but now we know better’. Like most progress narratives, this story is anchored not simply in a crude compression of historical experience, but in a sunny denial of present-day oppression. The ‘Angelic Quire’ correspondence plainly shows that the history of women in music is considerably more complicated than these progress narratives might suggest.

Crucially, this was not a debate between ‘progressive’ feminists and cultural conservatives. Many correspondents clearly felt the desire to raise the status of female singers, a desire that reflected a broader spirit of female liberation in late nineteenth century England. However, this support came with many caveats. As observed in Chapter Three, while advocates of female choristers widely attempted to dismantle constraining notions of feminine ‘modesty’, they did so entirely within the framework of ‘angelic’ womanhood – in many ways an equally patriarchal institution. As the universal reluctance to embrace the idea of ‘women in *surplices*’ reveals, the debate was hardly a precursor of women’s eventual entry into the priesthood. The ‘Angelic Quire’ correspondence forces us to question not simply the timing of women’s entry into sacred music, but what, exactly, an ‘entry’ meant for women’s rights in the first place. The picture that emerges is not exactly triumphant.

Finally, the ‘Angelic Quire’ debate offers some early insights into why female choristers came to be obscured from historical memory. The knot of anxieties invoked by women



in choirs expressed in these letters was complicated and wide-ranging. It extended beyond the obvious questions of sex and gender to invoke other, equally significant concerns: unarticulated anxieties regarding Church, nation, and music. If one is looking to explain the twentieth century lacuna on women in sacred music, these nineteenth-century legacies would be a good place to start.

Other directions for future research are equally abundant. Insights from Chapter Four concerning the ‘sacred’ sound of the boy treble voice demonstrate that there is ample room for further exploration of the ways in which gender and genre reinforce one another in music, or for the links between church music, denominational politics, and secularisation. Initial attempts in Chapter Three to provide an overview of nineteenth century angelic iconography highlight the need for a fuller exploration of the development of angelic symbols across the modern but particularly across the Victorian period, during which that crucial shift from sexless angels to female angels occurred.

More broadly, this thesis has only scratched the surface of a central gap in historical musicology: women in sacred music. A fuller exploration of women’s status in church music during the eighteenth century and before; of the gendered politics that led to the rise of the boy chorister in the mid nineteenth century; and of when, exactly, male and female choristers finally achieved parity in the choir stalls during the twentieth century would add substantially to our understandings of church music, of women in music, and of women’s position in broader English society during the past three centuries.

The *Huddersfield Chronicle* prediction that the women in church choirs would one day form the subject of an ‘entertaining volume’ underestimated the richness of this subject area. Female choristers have potential to fill not just of one volume, but many. And their story provides more than mere entertainment. It helps break apart late Victorian culture, revealing the complexities at play. Yet as well as helping us deconstruct one history, this topic also helps to build a new one. For the ‘Angelic Quire’ offers the beginnings of a new understanding of female involvement in sacred music: a past where women were not absent, but vocal.

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